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FAR WEST

AMERICA'S LEADING WESTERN FICTION MONTHLY

Me And My Uncle
by Randolph Newman

Stagecoach To Oblivion
by Wanda Matten

WAR WIDOW by Michael Starr

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ISSN 0149-6972

MEMBER

WESTERN WRITERS OF AMERICA

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NOTICE

During the 1950s television shaped the image of the American West as no dime novel ever had. Every evening millions of American homes were flooded with illuminated images of Westerners as varied as any to ever spring from the pens of writers.

Each of these western heros had his own look, style and gimmick. TV's Paladin effected a somber black outfit, and handed out calling cards that proclaimed his profession, "HAVE GUN, WILL TRAVEL." Steve McQueen, as the BOUNTY HUNTER dashed across the video veldt in faded denims with a chopped down Winchester strapped to his thigh. Jock Mahoney as the RANGE RIDER was more appropriately attired as a frontiersman in buckskins, while later he was the perfect image of a gentleman of chance as YANCY DERRINGER in a planters hat and white suit, while X. Brands (Yancy's stoic sidekick) looked like an Indian wrapped in a blanket that concealed a ferocious double hammered 12-guage scattergun.

The short-lived series JIM BOWIE featured, not a gun, but a knife, and a hero capable of cutting a swath through any thirty-minute adventure. The "hook" in the TV series TATE was a hero, returned from the Civil War, who had only one arm and who abhorred violent confrontations. Gail Davis, television's ANNIE OAKLEY carried a set of bone handled Colt Bisley revolvers, and confined her shooting to a warning shot. Once the outlaws knew who they were up against, it was usually hands up rather than face a shoot out with "Little Miss Sure Shot."

THE RIFLEMAN used a special Winchester, one that looked suspiciously like the one toted by John Wayne in Stagecoach. The REBEL used a sawed-off shotgun, and TV's JOHNNY RINGO used a LeMat pistol, combining the traditional sixgun with a special shotgun barrel that to-

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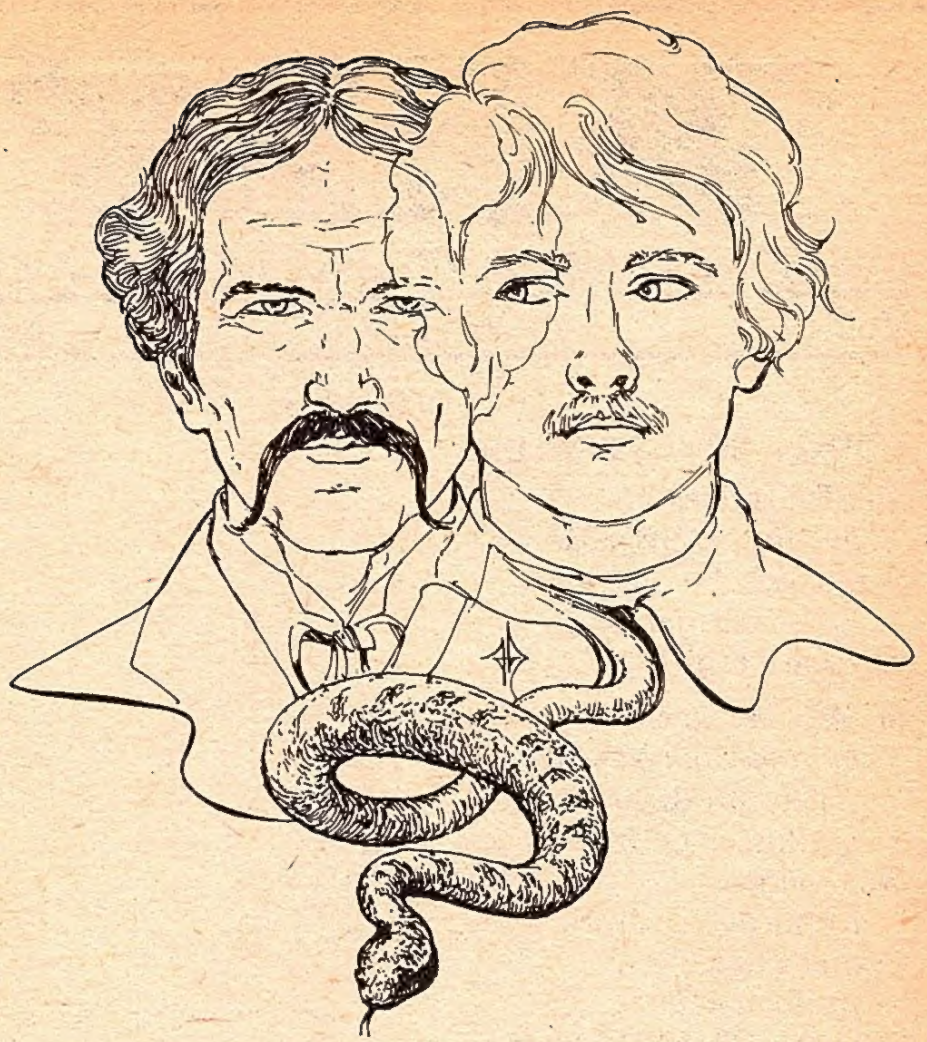

ME AND MY UNCLE

By Randolph Newman

"Got to kill those bastards soon as you spot one," my uncle reminded me as he drew a bead with his old Navy Colt. He pulled the trigger and a well-placed .36 slug neatly decapitated the Gila monster. "Rattlers, too," I offered. "Only they're faster. But rattlers give notice, son, and that's a mistake. You gonna strike, give no warning."

For hours I watched him gently rise and fall with the horse's gait as it walked this timeless wasteland. In all directions somber

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mountain ranges brushed clouds, the highlands not rising from the scrubby plains but floating above them. As if to reinforce the illusion, the hills loomed on a stubbornly unreachable horizon. My uncle said they were vast islands of green in the desert; they were mantled with cool forests, criss-crossed by streams and teeming with game.

His majestic air was only enhanced by this god-awful land. He shrugged off a week's trail dust like raindrops on an oiled canvas. In his high boots and kidskin duster you wouldn't know he was the shorter of us, unless we stood back to back. The hard physique and taut muscle tone were a legacy of three lean years running the Gulf blockades under the Stars and Bars, so he'd said, and in Reconstruction Texas a man like my uncle couldn't afford to let his body go to pot.

My uncle's salt-and-pepper hair was fluffy and buoyant. Kept in place by his own special hair cream, it was unruffled by all but the strongest wind. His luxurious drooping mustache was blacker than any African who worked our fields when I was a child. Now I stroked my own whispy blonde tribute and despaired of ever gracing my face with such a magnificent adornment.

Every year or so he'd show up at our south Missouri estate, and for weeks I'd see his dark angular features and cold gray eyes in my dreams. He brought a jolly, worldly-wise air, but left a cloud of gloom so heavy Poppa once told him to stay south; Mother seemed to fall ill every time he came around. One day in anger Mother said I was becoming more like my uncle every day, and Poppa slapped her.

There was much to think about on this desert trip, and a lot of time to think about it. I could tell he still smarted from yesterday morn when we'd been run out of El Paso by a pack of dung-splattered louts. If I didn't know better, I'd say there might be some truth in their allegations, or maybe that whore had it coming . . . anyway, my uncle said we'd have a nice stake by the time we got to Los Angeles. Obviously, El Paso was not the place to get our start. Things like this made me wonder.

"It's spring," I announced cheerfully, to break the silence more than anything else. "Ought to be lots of cowboys in Las Cruces, getting ready for the Pecos drives."

"I see you're learning," he said as if this was a normal conversation and not the first words exchanged since midday. "You want money, son, first you must know where and when. Then you figure the how."

We must have ridden another half mile before he added, "But cowboys are not paid until the *end* of a drive." I nodded stupidly, as always.

"Days of the big drives are numbered," my uncle pronounced. "Five, maybe ten years, this whole country's going to be sheepgrazed, homesteaded, cut up, parceled out, fenced off, sold back and forth a dozen times by the rich men."

"Will we make town by evening?" I asked, strangely depressed. "Very soon," he said. I followed his gaze to the north, but what he saw in that yucca-studded wasteland eluded me.

The main street was a dusty gap between rows of sturdy adobe blockhouses and the more recent timber structures of a generation of displaced Southerners. We reined up in front of the largest hotel in town.

"Now, a bath," he said as we strolled through the cramped lobby to the front desk.

"Uncle, couldn't we have a drink and a quick bite first?"

He looked at me strangely. "All right," he said and walked directly to the larger ground floor room that served as a saloon and dining hall. "Draw us two cold ones, friend," he instructed the stooped, squinty-eyed man perched behind the gleaming pine-topped bar. The little reptile set the frosty mugs down and turned away. My uncle grabbed his arm rather roughly. "Where," my uncle demanded with a gesture that indicated both the empty room and the quiet town, "the hell is everybody?"

"Have you not heard?" said the gnome, with a Spanish lilt to his voice. "Silver. Big strike. Not far. Arizona Territory."

"Silver," I mused as we sat.

"Son," my uncle said in that tone of his, "before you go chasing off across the burning sands you always double-check a story." He jerked his head in the direction of the bored Mexican, now polishing the counter for the hundredth time. "Now we just heard from a town's best source of information." He drained the mug and smacked his lips. "Don't hurt to see what the second best source has to say. Tomorrow early, we pay a visit to the town editor." He rose. "Assuming, of course, this rathole has a newspaper." With this he daubed his foam-flecked mustache with one of those silk hankerchiefs. "Pay the man," he ordered, and was on his way to a hot bath.

I'd never seen a place like Tombstone, but of course I hadn't been in Dodge five years ago like my uncle. Tents and wood frames fronted a dust-choked main street, no more than a swatch of land cleared for access to the half-built saloons and dance halls.

"Business booming?" said my distinguished relative to the dapper man behind the bar of the first noisy gaming room we entered.

"Never better," the barkeep replied. "What's your preference?"

"Brandy?" I ventured. My uncle nodded approvingly.

"Yes sir. I have some here, all the way from France. Around the Horn it come."

"Right," muttered my uncle as he surveyed the room through an eye-burning tobacco haze. As the bartender set the glasses before us my uncle leaned over the counter. I had to strain to hear his words over the babble of customers and the clinking of an out-of-tune upright.

"Listen, friend, can you advise me?" He put his arm over the other man's shoulder. "Confidentially, of course." My uncle gently pulled the man's face to within inches of his. "A nice quiet game. Oh, you know, nice fellows, medium stakes."

The barman nodded thoughtfully. "Stranger, let's be straight. You strike me as a man not unfamiliar with the ways of gambling."

"Mister, I like your eyes," my uncle said in a certain tone of voice I'd gotten to know well. "And the Good Lord knows, a man needs a friend in a wild town like this. What I really want are players who think they're good, but could use a little lesson. And can afford it, of course. I wouldn't want to be taking the bread out of a child's mouth, you understand."

"Oh, of course not," said the man, locked in place by my uncle's relentless eyes.

"Your tip will be ten percent of what I can make tonight," my uncle said in response to the barman's unspoken question.

"I do get your drift, stranger. Now over there, that's Red Mallery's game. You can't miss the big Mick."

He was right. You couldn't miss the carrot-topped Irishman. A faded green derby capped his flaming mane. Red didn't call for his cards, he bellowed.

"Red mixes his cards with a little too much whiskey. And those men he's playing with, they're some slick California boys. Not exactly what you'd call amateurs, but I seen better. And a fellow like you . . . New Orleans, right? A fellow like you ought to be able to pick up an honest buck in that game."

"Obliged, friend," and my uncle strode right past that hot game and over to a quiet four-man table near the swinging doors. Here sat two miner types, a grizzled cowhand in batwing chaps and a sombrero, and a huge buffalo man; scruffy characters, and not at all in my uncle's class.

"Gentlemen," my companion inquired politely. "May I sit in next hand?"

"Uncle . . ." I whispered.

They stared at us. A burly prospector lowered his cards. "Sure, Slick," he said and the others nodded. "We'll deal you in. But you get up when we say so!"

"Now that is kind of you. And perhaps you'd agree to a reasonable time limit. Shall we say . . . midnight?"

"Perhaps," mimicked the buffalo hunter, an enormous buckskin-clad shootist type. The men finished the hand as my uncle went to find a chair.

"Why these small potatoes?" I asked out of earshot.

"Because, my boy, Red and his California boys are pros. And I'll bet dung to doughnuts he'll throw the barkeep fifteen or twenty percent for steering a tinhorn his way."

I must have looked at my uncle strangely.

"I just don't want to stay in this purgatory any longer than we have to."

I said nothing, jerking my head in the direction of the bartender, who was watching us.

"Always assume the other man's as crooked as you are," my uncle advised, and brought his chair to the table.

"Son, why don't you go out and shoot some cactus?"

I hated when he talked to me that way in front of trash like them, but I went and did just that. I trudged up the long hill to the cemetery to shoot the arms off the little cholla trees. My uncle always said practice time is time well spent.

I'm pretty damn good. I don't think he knew how good. I love this Smith & Wesson he gave me. It's lighter than his old Colt, and fits in my breachband just right. I can sweep aside my duster, pull the revolver, cock it and aim it all in one smooth motion. My uncle always told me, sure is no harm in being fast, but it's only a fool who shoots before he's aimed. And only a fool, I could add, carries a gun in a place like Tombstone without knowing to aim straight and true. I was practicing a quick re-load when my eye caught the sun glinting off a bottle in the dirt about twenty yards off. It was the same shot my uncle had made in the desert the other day when he killed the big lizard. I snapped the cylinder in place, swung the revolver up and squeezed off a straight round that exploded the bottle in a joyous shower of thick brown glass.

That night I would clean and oil the weapon. My uncle, who carried the same gun he'd used in the war, told me to treat a good pistol like an old friend. If cared for, he said, the gun, unlike the friend, could always be counted on. I spent the afternoon and fifty rounds there and it was a good session. Now the desert night could have the graves to itself.

I rolled a smoke and ambled down the slope to town and my uncle. With any luck, I thought, he's already made enough to buy us the best Tombstone has to offer. I hoped mine had blonde curls that spilled to her waist when she took the pins out.

With the onset of dusk in Tombstone the streets empty and the saloons fill. On a bench, his back to the rough plank bar, sat our buffalo hunter with a bottle. His gaze was fixed on the game that went on without him. There was a look in his eyes that sang a song of joy for me, and I immediately sought the object of his hatred.

At the table he had joined hours ago sat my uncle. Facing him now were Mallery, two of those California slickers and a nattily-dressed cuss I'd never seen before. Their eyes and thoughts were lost to the cards, their brows knitted in concentration. In front of my uncle was a pile which, at a glance, I took to be about a thousand dollars in paper, coin and nuggets, and in the center of the table was more money than I'd ever seen in one place in my life.

I backed to the bar, unable to take my eyes off them. "Whiskey," I croaked to the barkeep. "Full house, queens and fours," someone, not my uncle, said, and my stomach kicked over.

My uncle showed a poker hand slowly and dramatically, a habit cultivated for those rare occasions when it was necessary to palm a card at the last moment. I always expected his opponents to seize his cards and end the maddening ritual. "I'm sorry, my friend," he said at last. "I have a full boat as well, but as you see, with kings high." I think I let out a whoop. He began pulling that beautiful pile toward him.

Suddenly, I heard another voice. "But I threw away the king of hearts!"

It couldn't be. My uncle wouldn't make such an amateurish blunder. The man must be mistaken.

"You must be mistaken, friend," my uncle said soothingly.

"Mistaken? We'll see about that!" And there was a gun

pointed at my uncle's heart!

There was a grate of chairs as a dozen people rose as one to get cover. "Red . . ." the man holding a gun on my uncle said. But that's all he said. It's almost as if the red hole appeared in his forehead before I fired. A woman shrieked and I shot the sore loser again for good measure. He crashed to the floor taking the heavy table with him. The money scattered and I saw my uncle dive after it. I spun around and there was the buffalo hunter bearing down on me behind a big gun barrel. I squeezed the trigger and his knees just buckled as he collapsed. A bullet from somewhere whizzed by my head and blew up a bottle on a shelf behind the bar. Then I heard the Navy Colt explode and saw the big red-headed Mallery come down like a mountain. Someone ran out through the swinging doors and all of a sudden the bartender was looking at me over the biggest double-barreled shotgun I ever saw. I fired and fired again, and then again. There was a look on his face as if he actually thought I was going to let him blow me in two with that thing. As he dropped he let go with both barrels and half the ceiling came down.

My uncle beat me through the front door. Down the street somebody yelled something, and men on horseback and on foot were coming this way. Maybe the law, I don't know, but my uncle fired in their direction and then the dirt at our feet was spitting up at us, and a bullet just missed me and took one of the swinging doors off the hinges. They were letting loose with new quick-action rifles. We turned and fled back into the saloon. On the run my uncle seized a chair and hurled it at the back window, he was through even as the glass disintegrated, and was on his feet in the alley and on a horse in a flash. I saw it all clearly as I sailed through the opening right behind him in a graceful arc, he was mounted up and had the reins and I stopped. In mid-air, just like that.

The gunplay was over faster than I can tell it, but now I was in some nightmare where you move like you're underwater, you run and run and don't go anywhere. Not twenty feet in front of

me was my uncle, ready to ride for hell, staring at me in disbelief as I hung there half-in, half-out of the building. I snapped my head around and there was the buffalo hunter, big as life and just drenched with blood. His huge hands were locked around my leg in a crazy death-grip. Ever so slowly I was pulled back, back into the saloon. In my mind's eye I watched myself in their hands, pounded to a pulp, maybe dragged around town behind a horse for laughs, finally strung up in the desert sun, swinging in the breeze while the buzzards picked me clean and white. I had enough time to see my uncle turn and ride.

So I jammed my pistol into that buffalo man's eye and pulled the trigger. The gun was empty. In blind panic I smashed it down with all my might onto his head. His eyes blanked out, the vise-grip hands went to jelly. There were more shots, it felt like it took a week to scramble through the window, but somehow I was out in the alley.

I never rode so hard in my life, jabbing my spurs into that poor horse for all I was worth. He must have been a Kentucky racer or something, you'd think he was outrunning the Southern Pacific. In minutes that awful town was a distant jumble of mud and timber. I could still see my uncle's dust-cloud ahead in the fading light. The mount he'd grabbed was no plowhorse either. At this pace we'd be in Mexico in an hour with two dead animals.

Now I was at his side. He pointed to a range of hills a few miles off to the southeast. I understood. We could hide there, collect ourselves, plan. Me and my uncle. The man who said once a fellow runs out on you, you'll never know when he'll do it again.

The hills offered a good vantage point, more so now under a giant newly-risen moon. As if Someone was on our side, a streambed was still flush from last winter's storms. We dismounted and walked the animals a bit so they wouldn't cramp up.

"Hell of a job you did back there, son." We let the beasts take a little water.

"How much?" I asked at last.

"Three, four hundred," he lied, and handed me some crumpled twenty-dollar notes. "Two strangers together are easy to spot," he informed me. "We'll split up for a while."

We paced side by side, as if afraid to stop moving.

"I have friends in Sonoita," he continued. "They distrust strangers, of course, so I'll have to go alone. But they can make good contacts for us."

It suddenly struck me that I was walking slouched over. I straightened. This more proper stance was unfamiliar, almost uncomfortable.

"You will go on to Tucson and wait word at the Congress Hotel," my companion informed me. Walking with my shoulders carried back like this I topped him by nearly three inches.

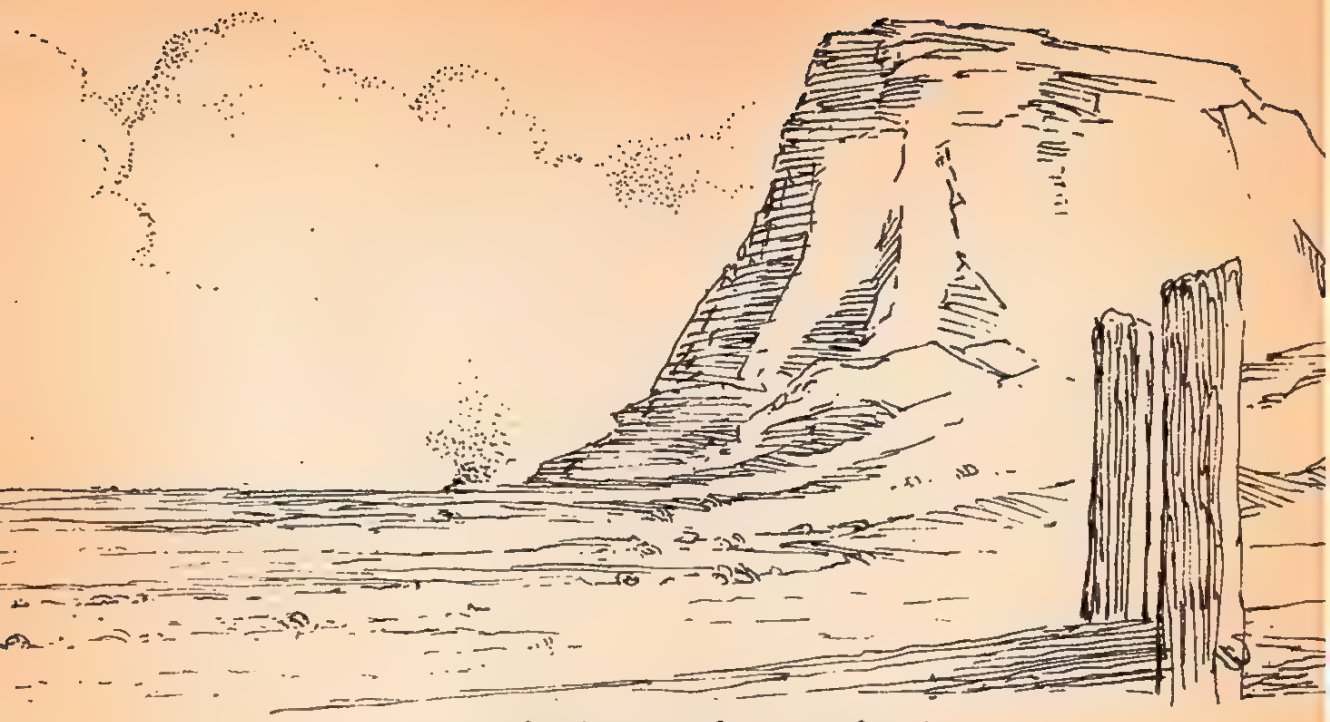
"Five minutes after I ride into Tucson I'll be dancing on air at a hanging party," I reminded him.

"Not so, my boy, not so. Me, yes. I'm distinctive. But you? Pardon me for saying this, but you could pass for any old range bum. Here . . ." and he tossed me his hat. "Wear this and shave. Now we're wasting time. If you've killed someone important, there are riders out there right now."

Had I always hunched over like some cripple when I walked down the street with this man?

"We'll be able to ride on together in a week or so," he promised and sat down on a dry-rotted log. I was weighing my thoughts when a familiar sound made us perk up our ears like hunting dogs. My uncle sprang to his feet. He had disturbed a snake, and the thing was buzzing its rattles. My gun was out first and my shot was right on the money.

My uncle dropped like a plumb line and the snake slithered away. That rattler may still live in that log, and my uncle is certainly still there if someone hasn't found him and buried him. Sure, I've got a long way to go, but my uncle taught me well. And a young man can go pretty far on two full waterbags and three thousand dollars.



PA, THERE'S A RIDER COMING

By Roscoe LeGresley

The boy stood at the edge of the ranch yard, squinting hard against the glare of the rising sun, as he looked toward Cooper Butte, several miles away. The road to the ranch ran past this mountain, skirting its base, then lined out straight again across the desert, to finally end here at the ranch held by the boy's father, Jim Kincaid.

Shifting his position so the sun did not hit him in the eyes, twelve-year-old Robert Kincaid, still staring hard into the distance, had spotted a rising column of dust that was about where the road would be.

That moving dust cloud could mean only one thing, a rider was coming. He watched another minute or so, then satisfied someone was headed toward the ranch, he half turned and

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called excitedly toward the adobe ranch house, "Pa, Pa, there's a rider coming."

He waited, no one appeared and the excitement grew in his voice, for visitors were few at the ranch.

He called a second time to his father, who would be in the kitchen getting breakfast.

This time there was a response to his call, for a side door opened and a tall, slender man walked toward the boy. Dressed in the usual range attire, jeans, high heel boots and blue work shirt, he appeared a typical cowman. The only thing missing from Jim Kincaid's dress was the customary gun belt and holstered six shooter around the waist.

Handsome in a fortyish sort of way, dark hair turning gray at the temples, face strong, rugged, suntanned, with blue eyes setting off the quiet determination of his face, he strode easily toward his son, who was again watching the plume of rising dust.

Stopping alongside him, he squinted down the road without saying a word. The boy looked at his father, a question in his eyes, but he waited, knowing his elder was evaluating the coming rider.

Finally after a long pause, he could wait no longer. "Who could it be, Pa?" came the anxious question.

The elder Kincaid, right hand rubbing his jaw, answered, "I don't know, son, but it will take a while for him to reach here, then we'll find out."

In his mind he knew it wouldn't be their neighbor, or any of his men, as they were on the far side of the range working cattle.

He grinned down at the boy, "In the meantime let's eat breakfast."

"But, Pa."

"No buts, son, there's plenty of time, let's eat." He turned, heading for the house, the boy following, still casting glances over his shoulder toward the road as he walked.

Ordinarily there was conversation between the two at meal-

time, but the elder Kincaid seemed to be in deep thought as he ate this morning. For the most part, his eyes looked at his plate, and when Robert tried to strike up a conversation again about the approaching rider, his father avoided the subject in a terse manner.

The meal over, the boy was reminded of his chores of washing the dishes and putting the remainder of the food away. As he started about his work his father went through the living room, entering his bedroom where he remained for a minute or so.

Emerging, Robert drew a sharp breath, a tightness gripped his heart as he watched his father buckle on his cartridge belt, from which hung a heavy Colt revolver.

A nameless fear swept over him as he watched the holster being tied down, for a fast draw. He had only seen his father buckle on his gun once before, several years ago, when Walt Crandall, who had claimed the big spring above the house, rode over one day with several hands intending to run the Kincaids off the ground, although he had no legal right to the spot.

The boy recalled the day when Crandall had arrived. Backed by tough hands, he started to bluster and threaten his father, who was standing quietly, facing the group. His father had made him stay in the house, but he could hear the invectives hurled by the rancher.

The riders, three besides Crandall, had drawn up in a line facing Kincaid, all of them carrying six shooters at their belts and each with a Winchester tucked in boots under their legs. They were grinning, enjoying the lacing Crandall was giving Kincaid.

Finally the rancher, running out of breath, wound up his tirade by saying, "You tear down that dam you put on the creek and be out of here by tomorrow morning."

As he finished one of the riders had let his hand stray toward his holstered gun. A shot rang out and his hat jumped from his head, as smoke curled lazily from the gun Kincaid held in his hand.

Crandall and the others, white faced, fought their nervous

horses, fearing the next shots would sweep them from their saddles. Crandall's face had turned ashen, his hands had gone shoulder high, as he tried to comprehend the speed with which Kincaid had drawn and fired.

Neither he nor his men had ever seen anything like this display of gun work and now the muzzle of that same weapon was centered on his chest.

"We can live in peace, or I'll kill every man before he leaves this yard," stated Kincaid in a flat, level voice. "Get one thing straight right now, this is my land, all legal, and if I'm killed, remember all of you may be dead also, and sure as hell you, Crandall."

"You see," he went on, "I could have put that bullet in the chest of your rider just as easy."

Finally Crandall found his voice, "Kincaid," he said, "you can have the water."

He wanted no part of this man. In the beginning he had thought Kincaid would be cowed easily, but he now saw this opinion had been a bad mistake.

"Come on, men." He started to rein his mount away.

"Hold it." The deadly click of the Colt in Kincaid's hand had a chilly sound as its hammer was drawn to full cock. The riders froze again.

"I want this settled right now. As I said we can live in peace if you want, Crandall. There will still be water, all you need, when I get through with it. As you can see, I have ditched the overflow on down the hill and into the streambed where it's been running all these years. All I want is enough for my place here including some hay ground, what do you say?"

Death was in the hot air. The riders were sweating. True there were four of them, with only five cartridges left in the black Colt. They might kill the lone man, but not before he had swept at least several of the saddles clean and this time for keeps.

Who would be the first to feel the blast of that gun? They kept hands clear of weapons, each trying to quiet his horse as much as possible, lest a nervous move trigger this slim stranger

into deadly action again.

Kincaid's eyes were on Crandall, who finally blurted out, "Hell, fellow, put that damn gun away, we can talk." He was almost pleading.

For a moment Kincaid continued to eye the man carefully, then in a swift movement he uncocked the gun and slid it into the holster. The men relaxed, grinned nervously as Crandall eased his hands down to the saddle horn asking, "Fellow, what's your name?"

"Kincaid, Jim Kincaid," came the crisp reply. Crandall relaxed more fully as he eyed the man, and almost in a friendly manner asked, "How did you know me?"

"I was told at Mineral Wells, when I filed on this ground, you probably would be around to try and run me off."

Crandall grinned, "Yeh, guess they know me alright, but tell me," he had grown almost friendly, "what are you going to do with this piece of ground? It's not big enough for a cattle spread."

"I'm going to raise horses," replied Jim, as he pointed to a mare and stallion in the rough brush corral.

"These horses," he went on, "they're called *Morgans*, some of the fastest and toughest animals ever bred and they're excellent for working cattle and they can race as well."

The riders were attentive now, for all of them loved horses, which were a part of each man's life and in spare time they raced their half-wild Mustangs for both sport and money.

Crandall relaxed as he eyes took in the pair of magnificent animals that had been watching the group from the enclosure.

"Kincaid," he said, looking down, "from now on you will have no more trouble from me, and here is my hand on the promise."

He rode to Kincaid, offering his hand.

"It's a deal," said Kincaid, shaking the rope worn hand, "And any time any of you are over this way, drop in and visit."

"We'll do just that," said Crandall, "and furthermore if anyone bothers you or you need help, all you need to do is let us know. One thing for sure, we need better horses in this

country and I love to race them." He grinned and waved to Jim as he and his riders wheeled away down the trail across the sagebrush.

It was there in this yard where only minutes before death had stood greedily waiting, only to be thwarted by the reasoning of men. The ghostly specter turned away as a new friendship was born in only minutes.

This had been five years ago, Robert recalled, the last time he had ever seen his father wear the gun. True, he had been allowed to practice at times with it, under his father's supervision, who taught him how to use the heavy weapon, but always it had gone back into the dresser drawer as they went about developing the horse ranch.

Besides the adobe ranch house, there was a pasture now, watered by the big spring where several colts roamed, offspring of the brood mare and stallion, the nucleus of a fine herd.

These thoughts had raced through Robert's mind as his father strode toward the door pausing for a moment, once again looking down the road at the plume of dust, which was drawing closer.

Silently he gazed for several moments, then turning to Robert, he said, "You stay behind these adobe walls and if anything happens to me, head for Crandall's and tell him what happened." His voice was tense, just as it had been in the yard five years ago. It had a quality that forbade any kind of arguing.

"Ride Traveler," his father went on. "He can outrun anything in this part of the country."

The boy nodded. He was gripped by a greater fear than ever, who was this rider coming, and what made his father seem so sure he was an enemy? He wanted to ask, but knew he would have to wait.

His father turned away, eyes once more on the road. His hand went to the butt of the gun, raised and lowered it several times in the holster to make sure it was free, and putting on his hat, he strode through the open door into the yard.

Outside the house Kincaid paused, looking hard and long at the plume of dust moving closer. Much closer, for now and then he could see the lone horseman as he topped out on small rises along the way. Not riding fast but steadily, Kincaid surmised. The rider knew the ways of the desert, for even though it was still early, the sun was warming up the land and to push a horse unnecessarily could mean disaster.

This was it, thought Jim, as he stared down the road at the oncoming horseman. This was the showdown, one which he had expected for fifteen years. A long time. His thoughts turned backward spanning those years to a time before Robert had been born. It had been a day almost like this, fact of the matter about this time of year, but the locale had been entirely different.

There had been no cool, quiet ranch house in the background where he was that day. No, it had been the middle of a hot, dusty street in Platte, Kansas, a tough little cow town. There were buildings alright, but all windows were shuttered, with occupants peering through cracks in them as they watched the scene unfolding on Main Street.

Out there had been Marshal Jim Kincaid, a badge on his vest that flashed a little in the sun as he strode straight ahead, watching for Dave Rickbaugh, father, and the leader of a wild bunch of boys that had terrorized the country with holdups and murders until Marshal Kincaid had been sent in to wipe out the bunch.

It had been a bloody showdown that had come in an explosive fight only a few days before when Rickbaugh's three sons had attempted to kill the Marshal on this same street. Two of them had tried to whipsaw him from opposite doorways, but when the smoke cleared, both lay dead. No sooner had the echos died away when Bert, the youngest and last son, not yet twenty one, dashed from a building behind the Marshal with a double-barreled shot gun. Kincaid, hearing the sound, instinctively spun, shooting as he turned and the last of the brothers lay dead.

Old Dave had been away, but on his return he had gone wild, sending out the word he would kill the Marshal and had issued a challenge for an early morning showdown.

The old man was fast with a gun, one of the best in the territory. Kincaid wondered vaguely which would die today. He didn't want to kill the old man, but Rickbaugh had to pay and it was his job to see that he did, one way or another.

Tiny dust devils rose from the street as a slight breeze moved the dirt to and fro. Not a soul was in sight and no sound, except the whisper of the wind, broke the early morning stillness. All horses had been moved behind the buildings, leaving the road guant, empty.

Kincaid's boots kicked up small spurts of dust as his heels settled solidly with each step. The rowels of his spurs rolled slightly as he walked, leaving a straight line following his bootmarks.

He was nearing the Yellow Dog Saloon. Now warily he watched the batwing doors which he knew would erupt any second. He was within a close fifty paces, when the doors banged open and the hulking figure of Rickbaugh lunged outside.

Dirt, grime, and sweat stained every inch of his six-foot frame, but there was nothing unkempt about the six shooter at his belt.

Rickbaugh sidled into the street as Kincaid called, "Throw down your gun and stand trial."

His only answer was a snarl from the twisted, unshaven lips of Rickbaugh as he hand streaked into a blur for this sixshooter.

Two shots rang out almost as one and Rickbaugh was lifted as if by a giant hand as the bullets plowed into his right shoulder, then slammed him down hard into the dust which billowed up in a small cloud.

Cursing like a madman, he started clawing his way through the dirt for his gun which lay several feet away.

Kincaid was upon him like a cat. "Hold it, Rickbaugh! It's all over."

"Damn you Kincaid, you better kill me, if you don't I'll get you if it's the last thing I ever do," he snarled.

"No more killing, Dave, there's been too much of that already."

The scene had coursed in retrospect through Jim's mind as he stood there in the yard waiting for the rider. The last thing Rickbaugh had threatened as guards started him for the Territorial Pen had been to swear an oath to kill Kincaid as soon as he was released.

Five days ago Rickbaugh would have served out his sentence and been set free. Five days would be all a man needed to make the ride from the pen to this place, especially if his heart still burned with revenge.

Jim squinted down the road again, the rider was much closer. Time to move out, meet him as far away from the house as possible, just in case.

Funny how alike this walk was to the one fifteen years ago, yet there was one big difference this time—his adversary would be in the open.

Jim wondered what the old man would look like close-up. That many years in jail would surely change a man. He wondered if Rickbaugh was still fast with a gun.

He was a hundred yards from the ranch house; this was far enough, he surmised. He pulled his hat lower to better shade his eyes, and with feet planted solidly, waited for the rider, who had slowed his mount to a walk.

As he came closer, Jim could not recognize anything familiar about him. Well, fifteen years would change a man. Jim waited, then became puzzled as the horseman slowed his mount, then did a peculiar thing by lifting both hands shoulder high, guiding his horse with his legs as he came on toward Jim.

Jim tensed, settling himself squarely on his feet, and for the last time slid his forty-five up and down in its holster. Satisfied, he hooked both thumbs in his cartridge belt, his right hand only inches from the butt of the gun.

The rider came steadily forward, his horse seemed to sense the tension of the moment as he nervously stepped off the distance toward the standing man.

Jim squinted hard. This man was not Rickbaugh, nothing familiar at all about this figure, but he was heavily armed, for he could see a gun hanging at his middle and the stock of a Winchester protruded from a boot under the rider's right leg. But he still held both his hands at shoulder height, the bridle reins knotted, lay on his horse's neck. The distance narrowed to less than a hundred yards, as the rider sat straight in the saddle, his attitude wary, watchful.

Jim stood solidly as the rising sun beat down beginning to heat up the land. In a few moments guns would thunder and one, maybe both would die.

Yet he was puzzled by this man with his hands in the air . . . he had made no hostile move, but kept coming steadily toward him. Who was he, what was his mission?

Then when only a few yards away he spoke to his horse and it came to a halt as the men surveyed each other.

Jim could see the man's face only vaguely, as it was shaded by his hat brim, but it was not Rickbaugh, although the man had a heavy beard and was covered with dust. He guessed him somewhere around forty and dressed in jeans and work shirt. A tag from a sack of tobacco dangled from the shirt pocket on the left side. This made a target for Jim, this was where his bullets would go.

Suddenly the silence was broken as the man asked cautiously, "Are you Kincaid?"

For a moment Jim was taken aback, then replied, "That's me!"

"Alright, I'm not after your scalp. Fact of the matter is I want no part of you, for Dave told me how you handle a gun. I only want to deliver a message from him to you."

He was still keeping his hands far above the pistol at his belt. "You don't know it, but Dave died ten days ago. I know, for I was his cellmate, but before he went he made me promise to look you up and give you the news. Guess he got forgiving in his old age, anyway that's all there is to it and now I'll be going."

He pressured his horse into a turn with his knee and rode back down the trail careful to keep his hands up for at least a hundred yards before he lowered them.

Jim relaxed, stared at the rider who was growing smaller in the distance. It was over, all over. No longer would he have to wonder if from some shadow or ravine would come a shot that would end his life.

The rider was gone, only a plume of dust marked his passage as he rode toward Copper Butte. Jim realized the sun had grown hotter than ever and he was sweating heavily.

Turning toward the ranch house, he unstrapped his gun and belt, hanging it over his shoulder. A few minutes before it had felt natural, the most important thing in his life, but now it felt alien and he only wanted to put it away.

WAR WIDOW

By Michael L. Starr

It was summer time during the war years. Robin was busy fixing supper for herself and the kids when the word came that her husband had been killed in action. The messenger was a fighting man himself. He had seen the destruction of war first hand. This, it seemed to him, was always the worst.

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She was a beautiful woman, nicely tanned and with hair the color of a raven's wing. Her mouth was small and her eyes were wide. Prominent cheekbones highlighted a relaxed comeliness. He delivered his message.

Instantly her hair ceased to find a pleasing shape around her shoulders. Her complexion began to glisten like a beach awash with the waves of the sea. And like the sea's waves which dissolve the most formidable looking of sand castles, so the cascade of tears seemed to crumple her figure and bring forth for the first time in her life a turbulence to what had always been a face of security, of serenity.

Robin was in shock when the messenger left. For a time shock gave way to fear. What would she do? What could she do after eight years of marriage and two children. Without the skills of her husband what would become of her children, her home, herself?

The fear dissolved into grief. He was gone. So was his voice. So was the security of his presence. So was the warmth and pleasure of his touch. The words of her grandmother were clear to her now.

"Marriage," she had told Robin many years after her own husband's death, "is like two trees standing together through the years each shielding and shading the other through the heat and the storms. When one falls, the other is left to face the cold all alone, and it is always so much colder."

Robin wanted to give in to the grief that was pouring over her; to let it possess and destroy her, but she couldn't. She must not. She had to tell the children. She had to comfort them. She had to think about the funeral arrangements. She could not collapse . . . not yet.

The children would be coming in, in a little while. Robin dried her face. She bit back a stubborn sob and forced herself to keep on with supper.

"He doesn't like too much salt," she remembered as she seasoned the stew. The thought was a blow that momentarily shattered her self control and forced a whimper through her

clenched lips.

"What's wrong mama?"

Robin didn't turn to face the little boy. Instead she took a few steps away from him. She breathed slowly and deeply, blinking hard.

"Go get your sister."

She didn't hear him leave, but she knew he was gone. Like his father he could be very silent. As the two came back in Robin could see that her daughter was already starting to cry. Her son was trembling. He too wanted to cry, but was even now learning to master his emotions.

"Come here," she said as she knelt and stretched out her arms to them.

Somehow they knew. No one had told them, but they knew. The girl grabbed her mother's neck and wept inconsolably. The boy stepped forth hesitantly. He trembled. He clenched his fists. His breathing was loud and heavy as if he had been running a long way. She touched his arm. He went rigid.

There was no point in platitudes. There was no reason to try and fool them into thinking that their father had simply taken a long trip. The children knew all about the war and the suffering and hardships it worked on all of them.

"Your father is dead."

Now her son could collapse. He had played the man long enough. With his arms wrapped around her waist and his head buried in her breast, he too contributed to the awful sounds surrounding Robin. She held them tightly as if by this act she could somehow transfer their grief to her body. She absorbed every sob, every groan, every scream, but she did not add their pain to her own which was already eating like a cancer at her self control.

Robin was not aware of the passage of time, but it was quite dark when suddenly she realized that her work was done. The children had evidently cried themselves to sleep. Supper was pointless. Robin took them both to bed with her. She could not sleep. She could only remember.

They had always been outdoor people. Much of their courting had centered around long walks or horseback rides. He was a good horseman. He didn't bounce up and down as she did when the horse galloped. His body melted into that of the animal and they ran as one . . . His muscles were his horse's muscles. So perfectly did they flow together that she could never conceive of him as being anything but graceful. He was awkward though. One of his feet had been injured in a hunting accident as a boy. He walked with a limp. But she didn't see that, just as she didn't see her husband as a fighting man. He seemed too gentle for that profession. His touch was soft. His music was pleasing to the ear. His voice was kind. She had never heard a loud word in anger from him. Yet he was an officer and a much decorated one at that. It was all so strange to Robin, but he had believed in what he was doing.

"They are just mad dogs," he had said to her in a rare mood of hardness as they had stood together watching the sun rise. "All they want to do is destroy; our way of life, our homes, everything. And they think with all their people that they can eventually bury us by numbers alone. Well they're wrong. We will fight them and keep on fighting them so long as there is a man left to fire a gun."

For her own part Robin had wished for some sort of negotiated settlement that would end it all and she'd have him home safe. But he had believed in what he was doing and she had believed in him. So she kept silent. She never mentioned the fact that he didn't have to go; that he had already seen his share of the fighting and that he had even been wounded. So he went and made his stand and now he was dead.

He continued to fill her mind until the sun's brightness made her aware of the dawning of another day. She rose immediately and braced herself for the influx of people she knew would be arriving. As it turned out, some brought food, some ate food, some planned with her, and some comforted her. A few poured out their troubles to her.

According to some of them the battle in which her husband

had been killed had been a great victory. By actual body count over two hundred of the enemy had been killed. A great deal of ammunition and weapons had been captured. There were those who thought that maybe the turning point of the war had been reached and that peace was now a possibility. Robin had heard it all before and it really didn't matter. For her the war was over and she had lost.

By the time his body was brought in Robin had disposed of most of his things among relatives and friends. She had selected a burial site and chosen what he would wear. Her family would handle the other arrangements.

At the appointed hour, they came for her and the children. Her son, she noticed, had again mastered his emotions, but her daughter was, as before, weeping. In fact, from the sound of it many people were sharing her grief. Well, that was as it should be and soon, very soon, Robin would be able to let her own guard down and join them.

It took the procession two hours to reach the burial site. When they got there Robin was ready. The tears at long last trickled and then flowed as she watched them wrap her husband, Hawk-That-Hunts-Limping, in a buffalo robe. They covered him from the beaded soles of his feet spirit moccasins, over his red painted face, to his hair full of eagle feathers. As they hoisted him up on the burial scaffold she began cutting her hair off.

"Without him there is no need for beauty."

As they placed his weapons, flute, and medicine bundle with him she took out a skinning knife specially sharpened and began to make little cuts on her hands and wrists.

"Without him there is no need for life."

After they shot his favorite horse she and the others began wailing. Robin-That-Sings-In-The-Morning remained at this place for four days weeping and bleeding over a gentle and graceful man who died fighting for his country. She stayed there through the first days of the Cherry Ripening Moon in the year when the Sioux called the winter, "Went To Make Treaty."

THE PRINTER'S BRAND

By John Krill

alt Redpine drummed with short, thick fingers on the scarred top of the stone. His nails were black with ink. Streaks of it made frowning lines on his lean face. Once again he read the damp proof sheet spread on the ample flat surface of the compositor's stone. The bawling of newly arrived longhorns in the railroad holding pens failed to break his concentration.

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Done, he pursed his lips and glanced at his silent, equally smeared companion. "Go on and run it, Seal," he ordered.

Old Orwell Seal sucked noisly on the cud of tobacco in his cheek and coughed loudly. "It'll get you a heap of trouble, my boy." A large-veined hand held a stick filled with eight-point boldface type.

"It'll make trouble for Spade Dreen, too," the printer replied sharply. "That gunslick's been getting away with murder—and I mean murder, Seal. It's time to pull that sidewinder's fangs."

For the rest of the night the two men took turns working at the clanking and banging old handpress. The stack of printed sheets grew steadily and old Seal would shake his head dubiously whenever his rheumy eyes would gauge them. Redpine worked in deep silence, occupied with thoughts all his

own. Maybe it would have been well to print his own obituary in this issue of the *Liberal.* You can't accuse a man like Spade Dreen of being a cheat and ruthless killer without expecting a showdown.

The faint dawn found the weary printers heading for the hotel and bed. The papers would be distributed by Paul Walker—if he should be sober enough. Walker had come to Arizona for his health and had acquired a copious thirst for whiskey. He did odd jobs in order to earn money to indulge his taste. Distributing Redpine's papers was one of them. Besides, Walker had a deep feeling of obligation to the crusading printer. Redpine had kept a gang of rannies from tying him to the back of a half-broken mustang.

The printer slept very poorly. The debate raging in his mind prevented restful sleep. Had he done the wise thing? Of course it was too late to worry now, but his mind refused to relinquish the thoughts. "Yeah," he muttered irritably to himself, "Dreen will hyponitize me like he did with Mathers, Herbot, Mollar, and Leadman. All faster and better shots than him—and he'll shoot me dead just like them." He fell into a troubled nap.

Ever since a copy of "The Art of Hypnotism" had been found by the livery hostler and subsequently claimed by Spade Dreen, the ability to hypnotize had been attached to the gambler. His killing of proven gunmen seemed to bear this out. Redpine was skeptical.

Just the same, one important detail troubled Redpine. He had witnessed Dreen's showdowns with Mollar and Leadman. Both men drew faster than the gambler. Yet some strange force made both men jerk their heads to one side with an odd grimace. Their bullets went wide of the target. Dreen had then calmly blasted their lives out before they could fire again. Did the man have the ability to hypnotize? Seeing the sprawled bodies of Mollar and Leadman in the dust of the road, blood gleaming redly in the strong sun, convinced many a man that it was so. Redpine was not sure.

A loud hammering on the door broke through his uneasy

sleep. "Redpine!" an angry voice shouted, "open up!" The printer recognized the harsh tones. Spade Dreen. Throwing on his trousers and fumbling his feet into the boots, Redpine crossed the creaking floor and turned the knob.

Pasty face drawn into a mask of sheer rage, long black hair slicked down with grease close to the skull, almond-brown eyes glittering beneath the overhanging brows, Spade Dreen thrust a paper before Redpine's face. "Either you publish a retraction by noon tomorrow, or you shoot it out with me." The words came hissing out just above a whisper. Heads peered out of the other rooms, drinking in the scene.

"I don't wear a gun—and I'll publish the truth no matter who it concerns."

Dreen's eyes, piercing and narrow, fastened on Redpine's. "No one in this town will read what a coward publishes, Redpine. I've given you a choice. Or you can leave town."

Letting the offending newspaper fall from his immaculately manicured fingers, Dreen strode away without waiting for Redpine's answer. The printer stared after the square back primly draped in black with the top of a white shirt collar peering over the nape of the clean-shaven neck. He shut the door and stepped to the dusty window facing the street. The news had spread fast. Spectators idled on the sun-scorched and warped boardwalk, with eyes held on the hotel.

The metal bed protested wearily as Redpine flung himself flat on it. A knock sounded and the door was opened by Seal. "Hi, Orwell," Redpine greeted him, at the same time following the erratic movements of a wasp on the ceiling.

"I heard everything that killer said," the old journeyman printer drawled. He moved the wad of chew in mouth to a juicier position. "I reckon we stayed in Midway long enough, Walt. Time we pulled out for a more prosperous and law-abiding community."

"You suggesting that I run away, Orry? You feel that I'm afraid of Dreen?"

"Nope. But you won't solve nothing by being killed, Walt.

You've had showdowns with lots of tough characters. You can't help but have in this game. You are a mighty fine shot and a dang fast one. But this Dreen, he isn't natural somehow. He must have the evil eye like the Indians believe. Else how could he kill men faster on the draw than himself?

"I don't know, Orry. But it is some kind of a trick. I'm sure I can beat his draw easy."

"But the others beat his draw easy—and they died, Walt."

"Yeah, I know. And I know I'm not running from a cheap card cheat." Yet a doubt assailed him even as he spoke these words. He lost interest in the wasp's antics. The bed groaned again as he snapped his lean length erect. "C'mon, Orry. Let's get something to eat."

All eyes centered on him as they entered the hotel dining room. Whispers came and went among the tables. Heads shook in sympathy. But the eyes never left Redpine's table. The two men chewed and swallowed and sipped automatically. Food had no taste for them. Redpine was putting up a front of unconcern. But his mind insisted on reminding him of what had happened to such experts as Mollar and Leadman. What chance did he have against Dreen's hypnotic eyes?

"Damn!" he frowned. "Am I beginning to believe that too?" He sent the old journeyman to the print shop, and went to the Happy Hour saloon. The men lined up at the whiskey-soaked bar looked at him sadly. Solicitude was in their tones as they greeted him. Anger mounted in Redpine's heart. The fools had taken the outcome for granted.

Crusty Pete wrung his water-reddened hands in the dirty bar apron that barely covered a well-developed paunch. "Don't try to match lead with Dreen," he advised, refusing to take the silver Redpine placed on the bar for his drink. "Leave town for a few weeks. You can come back when Dreen cools off."

The dusty rannies on either side of him nodded their heads in agreement. "Be the best thing, Walt. He ain't human, he ain't," Crusty Pete went on. "He'll hypn'tize you sure."

"Gimme another drink and quit singing those dirges," Red-

pine snarled. This business of burying him before he was dead was getting under his skin. Each of the rannies tried to buy him a drink. "Farewell salutes, eh?" he inquired bitterly. The men cast down their eyes. With the anger mounting within him, Walt Redpine suddenly left the saloon.

A voice hailed him from the opposite side of the rutted road. "Hold on, Walt." It was Paul Walker. The printer stood still as the drunkard started across the road on wobbling feet. Redpine held out an arm to steady the swaying man.

"Well, what is it? Need more money for whiskey?" he asked impatiently.

"Lemme whisper inya ear, Walt."

The printer bent his head close to the shorter man's lips. "I'm gonna tellya 'bout how Dreen killed those men. I saw it all. Dreen—"

Redpoint shoved the drunk away angrily. "I know all about it. Dreen hypnotizes his victims. That's no secret." Tossing the indignant man a piece of silver, Redpine strode rapidly on. "If anyone else tells me about Dreen hypnotizing his enemies I'll go completely mad."

On inspiration, he entered the Silver Horn. This was where Spade Dreen ruled. The hum of voices became a painful silence as the batwings flapped shut behind him. Spade half rose from the poker table. But noticing that Redpine wore no gun, he sat alertly in his chair again.

"Whiskey," Redpine ordered, ignoring the poker table. The barkeep's jaws hung slack, showing the black spaces left by missing front teeth. A fly dropped on the glass-dented bar. It tried to walk through a splotch of whiskey. It staggered madly as the alcohol stung it, then fell over on its back and died. Redpine tossed off his drink, paid for it, and strolled casually toward the poker game.

That his presence was causing the gambler great concern, was apparent to the printer. He had calculated on this effect. While drinking at the bar, he had caught Dreen's eyes staring at him in the bar's back mirror. "Two can play the game of nerves,"

he thought grimly.

"Room for another player?" he asked with a grin at Dreen. Dreen's hand waved at the empty chair opposite him. Redpoint sat down. One by one the three remaining players threw in their cards and hastily rose to go. Trouble was in the air. "Here! Here!" He called cheerfully after them. "You boys forgot to cash your chips." With hangdog looks they returned, rapidly scooped up their chips, and just as rapidly left the two men to themselves.

"I wonder what's eating them?" Redpine said vexedly to Dreen. The gambler fixed his eyes coldly on him and shrugged his tailor-made coat shoulders once. Then he too rose and left the printer alone at the table. Redpine laughed tauntingly after him. He could see the red flush mount the sides of Dreen's neck clean up to the ears.

Just before he faded out of sight among the men at the bar, Dreen turned and gave the lone man at the poker table a stare charged with venomous hatred. A chill ran up Redpine's back. It reminded him of the day he came face to face with a cotton-mouth while swimming. More heads turned his way and tongues clucked with soft sympathy. It was a foregone conclusion, Walt knew, in the minds of these men. He rose from the table and went out into the street.

Paul Walker's uncertain hands pawed for his arm. He must've followed him here. "Wait, Walt. I know what'll happen to you if you meet Dreen." Redpine's anger was too complete for him to find words for a moment. Walker seemed half-sober and in dead earnest. A tan dog came up and nuzzled the drunk's dirty hands. "I seen what Dreen does, Walt, lemme—"

Still unable to speak from sheer rage Redpine shoved the slightly-built man aside and hurried off toward the hotel. The cur snarled after him and tried to comfort Walker by licking his hand.

"For an ex-pickpocket, Walker sure takes a lot of liberties with me," thought the printer. "Why doesn't he return to New York and get busy at his trade instead of trying to tell me what

a deadly hypnotist Dreen is? Every friend I've met fed me that line, breaking my nerve down instead of giving me support. You'd think they were all friends of Dreen."

Yet the power of suggestion was undermining his will. Already he was toying with the idea of leaving town. He could come back as soon as he regained control of himself.

Redpine locked his room door and tossed his weight on the lumpy bed. For a long while he stared at the fly-specked ceiling. The wasp was gone. Then he went to the battered chest of drawers and slowly drew out a cartridge-filled plain black belt and holster. He drew the Colt out of its bed and stared at spots where the blue finish had been rubbed off from long contact with the holster. Slowly he donned the heavy belt, the sweetish smell of fine oil filling his flaring nostrils.

He made his draw before the wavy mirror with a smooth economy of time and motion. "Much faster than Dreen," he spat at the reflection. "Yeah," another part of his brain sneered, "what good did it do Leadman and Mollar to be faster?" He tore the belt from his waist with a flood of curses spitting from his lips, and threw it back into the drawer. His hands trembled as he flopped back on the bed, his mind in a whirl of uncertainty.

A soft rap on the door sent him to it like a charging bull. He wanted to be alone. He wanted no visits from dirge-singing friends. He jerked the door open violently and stood glaring at Paul Walker. "Walt, you got to listen—"

"Damn you, get outa here!" One powerful hand grasped the drunk by the shoulder and propelled him forcibly down the dingy hall.

Walker was sobbing aloud as Redpine ran him out of the hotel front. "Listen to me, Walt, I—" But the printer went back to his room without a backward glance. He needed a drink bad. He rummaged around in the golden glow of the coal-oil lamp and came up with a bottle of whiskey. It tasted good.

Morning found Midway jammed with people. Redpine had printed no retraction and he had not left town. They were here

to watch Dreen hypnotize another victim of his wrath. Though most of them hoped the courageous printer would come out on top, none of them were confident enough to cover the bets offered by the shady citizenry of the county.

Walt Redpine sat alone in his room. Orwell Seal had wanted to be with him. This Redpine curtly forbade. He sat staring out of the window and at the ticking alarm clock on the bureau top. "Five minutes to go," he sighed almost with relief. The tension was driving him crazy. He stared out into the sunny street.

Suddenly he caught his breath and a thin smile wrinkled the set lips. Across the street he caught sight of Walker's wobbling, weaving form. Trying hard to keep his balance, the drunk had fallen against Milt Rapper who stood in the alleyway of the livery stable and Shontz' blacksmith shop. Rapper was Spade Dreen's inseparable companion.

The smile became a hearty laugh as Redpine watched Rapper struggle with the drunk's clutching grip. Then the watching man saw Walker's finger dip swiftly into Rapper's fancy vest pocket and draw out a shiny object. At the same instant, the ex-pickpocket shoved something else in its place. With an angry shove, Rapper threw Walker to the dusty ground. The drunk struggled to his feet and lurched off.

Mechanically Redpine checked his Colt for the final time. He opened the door of his room and made his way out into the sun-scorched street. Slowly he walked to meet the gambler who was approaching from the other end.

Redpine could see Rapper leaning casually against the corner of the stable. Horses switched idly at the buzzing flies as they waited patiently at the rail. "Give him the eye, Dreen!" Rapper shouted, sneering openly at Redpine. His fingers fondled something through the cloth of the vest pocket. But the printer walked on slowly unmindful of Rapper. How sharply the sun etched the black shadows. Redpine walked into the sun, but the brim of his sombrero shaded his eyes well enough.

Spade Dreen fastened his piercing eyes hypnotically on Red-

pine, then came to a halt opposite Rapper. Rapper's fingers reached into the pocket. The horses at the rail hid him from the tensely expectant crowd just out of the line of fire. He gave Spade Dreen a meaningful nod. Dreen's hard mouth opened in a cruel and expectant grin. Redpine watched him closely.

Then Rapper's fingers drew something out of the pocket. He glanced at the object and his sardonic face became deathly white. His eyes popped and the bloodless lips worked spasmodically. Dreen saw and fear flashed over his ruthless, pasty face. Quickly he regained control and in a level voice said: "I'll give you till tomorrow to pull stakes, Redpine."

Puzzled, Redpine replied coldly, "I don't run for the likes of you. Draw!" His hand made its skilled movement to the Colt. To his intense surprise Dreen threw his arms high into the air, weaponless. A murmur of amazement welled up from the many throats of the spectators drinking in the drama. Keeping Dreen covered, the printer advanced on him. Fear shone in the gambler's roving eyes.

From out of nowhere, a sober Paul Walker appeared. He stood before Dreen and said: "S'wrong, Spade? Did Rapper lose this?" Redpine saw a small circular mirror in the ex-pickpocket's hand. "I took it out of Rapper's vest, Dreen. And put in a piece of plain glass shaped just like this. I saw Rapper throw a beam of sunlight into the faces of the men you killed. That's what made them miss you—not hypnotism. Why don't you smoke it out with Redpine?"

"Dreen!" The frightened gambler looked at Redpine. The printer's face was set in fury. "Five minutes for you and Rapper to leave town." Dreen scuttled amid jeers to the livery stable, Rapper directly behind him. In less than a minute two mounted men raced away.

Redpine gripped Walker's hand tightly. He tried to say something to atone for the way he'd acted. No words came. The little man smiled warmly. "Aw, you don't have to say it. I understand." The printer grasped him heartily on the arm and propelled him swiftly toward the nearest saloon.

THE FASTEST KNIFE IN THE WEST

By John Jarrell

"I guess you could say the last gunfighter we had in Quicksilver," the old man said in his reedy voice, "was Chuck Barley, an' he's been lyin' in the graveyard, oh, mebbe fifteen years, Yeh, it were '77 when Chuck cashed in his chips, right over there by the bar." The visitor from the east looked with interest over his shoulder at the bar that ran three-quarters of the length of the saloon. "Ran into someone too fast for him? he asked.

"Well, it weren't quite like that," the old man said, signaling Mel the bartender for another beer. He voiced no objection when the stranger reached into his pocket for a nickel to pay for it.

The regular habitues of the Royal Flush knew the old codger's stories by heart, but they made pretty good listening for strangers, and he was ever ready to oblige. He'd been a man grown when Sibley and his Confederates rode into New Mexico in '62, he'd been farming near Lincoln Town when Billy the Kid and Pat Garrett were making history down in that area, and he had the sort of mind that stored up his memories, ready to turn the spigot at the slightest sign of interest by anyone. The kids

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around town loved him, and Saturday mornings when they were out of school, before time for him to have his first beer of the day, he would hold court at the livery stable for a crowd of wide-eyed youngsters.

"Chuck Barley had been askin' for it, all right," he was telling the easterner. "For a long time."

The visitor said he'd like to hear about it, and the old man was eager to oblige.

Barley, he said, was about twenty five when it happened, a big fellow with a spoiled look about him. "Thought he was cock o' the walk."

"He owned the Triple Cross, between here an' Santa Fe, pretty fair ranch," the old man said. "He inherited it when his daddy, Tom Barley, who was smart enough but forgetful, leaned over to pick up a dime outa the dirt behind a skittish horse. Horse kicked his head spang in. Well, they had a right good foreman at the Triple Cross, who ran things, so Chuck, he spent most o' his time right here in Quicksilver, with four, five no-account fellas who sucked around him because he'd pay for the drinks and buy them steak dinners down to Lily's place."

Barley, the old man went on, fancied himself with a gun, and was always practicing the fast draw, while his hangers-on told him how great he was at it.

"Now, you see," the story-teller related, "out here it really weren't like them dime novels would have you believe, with every man totin' a six-shooter, an' gun fights every hour or so. Most men didn't pack 'em an' a lot didn't even own no weapon. I never did, myself. I been around a long time an' I can count the honest-to-God gun fights I seen on the fingers o' these here two hands."

And Barley had two of those, he said, "but they really didn't amount to much, though the way he took on he was Billy Bonney an' Bill Hickok, rolled into one."

He sat silent a few moments, his faded blue eyes seeing back a decade and a half. Then he resumed his story.

"It so happened I had a front seat for both Barley's gun

battles; they was both right here in this saloon. That was before I went down Lincoln County way to farm for a couple o' years. First one was on a winter's night. Stranger come in, no spring chicken, he was better'n sixty. Packin' a gun, lookin' like he knew how to use it once. Well, he begun knockin' em away pretty fast, an' he was showin' his drinks when Chuck Barley an' his crowd sashayed in; they'd been eatin' at Lily's.

"Make a long story short, Chuck, he passed pretty close behind this fella and caught the toe o' his boot on this guy's heel. Didn't fall, just tripped a little. The fella said 'excuse me' nice as you please, but Chuck, seein' he was carryin' an' that he didn't look very fast, got nasty and called him a name reflectin' on his mother, if you get my meanin'."

The stranger said he got the meaning.

"This here stranger was pretty drunk, but he begun to back up, to give hisself room, tellin' Chuck, 'You better withdraw that remark, young fella, or else you better draw'. Chuck, he got kinda pale, but he couldn't back down now, so he turned toward the fella while people scattered to get outa the way. They was mebbe twenty feet apart, an' they both went for iron at the same time. The guy outdrew Chuck an' got off the first shot, but like I said, he was old an' drunk an' he missed. Chuck's bullet caught him right in the throat; later he claimed that's where he was aimin', whichsoever I never did believe."

The stranger was enthralled. He wanted to know what the law did.

"Oh, nothin'," the old man said. "Chuck's friends claimed the other fella drew first an' no one argued about it. But how that Barley strutted after that!"

The second fight was a month later, and this time, the old man said, it was with "an eastern dude; just come west, bought hisself a lot o' fancy clothes an' a gun an' one o' them holsters with a little catch to hold his weapon in. This fella, he must o' been readin' them dime novels an' he had an idee the west was like that. Probably been practicin' his draw out in a gully someplace an' figured as how he was fast. Anyhow, he an' Chuck had

words in a poker game, an' the upshot was they was facin' each other. The dude, he drew first, all right; he tried to, anyhow, only he plumb forgot to unlatch that there catch, an' couldn't clear his weapon. Chuck got him in the stomach; took the poor guy three, four hours to die. Doc Bates, he done the best he could, being drunk as usual, but too much o' his insides was tore up. So Chuck had hisself two dead, an' God, how he done carried on. He even noticed that there gun twice. He had folks pretty scared; Quicksilver always been a fairly peaceable little place."

There was time out for a refill, and by now four or five people who had heard the story before, but even so found themselves fascinated by the tale of Quicksilver's most famous citizen, had drawn around to listen.

His thirst momentarily quenched, the old man proceeded.

"Few weeks later, a street show come to town. One o' the acts was a Mexican fella, all dolled up in a fancy black suit with silver trim, an' he was a knife-thrower. The tricks he done with them knives was somethin' to see. Heaved 'em at a pretty senorita, an' never so much as grazed her—stuck knives in that board she backed up against within a half inch o' her face. Well, Chuck, he was mightily taken with that act, an' later he stood the Mex a couple drinks an' asked him all manner o' questions about throwin' a knife. So it wasn't no surprise to us when he showed up one day with a shiny knife he'd paid plenty for—about a five-inch blade an' good, stout handle. He'd sharpened both edges; hell, he coulda shaved with it. An' he had the harness shop make him a shoulder sheath—it went over behind his left shoulder, down his back. Chuck would demonstrate to us how fast he could get at that knife, an' he got even harder to get along with than before. No one wanted to tangle with him an' the way folks kowtowed to him would make you sick to your stomach. Them friends o' his kept bragging about how he was the fastest man in the territory with either a knife or a gun, and Chuck showed he believed 'em, too."

The crowd was getting larger, and the old man warmed to his story.

"One night, it was April, '77, Chuck got his chance. Frenchy Bordeaux come in one night, just back from his winter's trappin' in the Sangre de Cristos. Smelt like it, too. Frenchy never was one to take much to water. It hadn't been a good trappin' winter, an' Frenchy hadn't made much money, but he was in for his annual drunk. An' he had his big, long skinnin' knife stuck in his belt, as always. Well, he wasn't much for friendliness at best; he didn't speak to anybody, just bellied up to the bar an' told the barkeep to leave a bottle o' red-eye in front o' him.

"He was on mebbe his third one when Chuck, who'd been eyin' that toad-stabber in Frenchy's belt, decided this was the time to show how expert he'd got with his own knife. By now he believed all that stuff his friends had been sayin' about how good he was. So he set out to rile Frenchy, which wasn't hard to do, an' right now, what with havin' had a poor trappin' winter, easier than ever.

"So Chuck, he said to his friends, loud-like, 'Hey, boys, I believe they's a polecat in this here saloon.' He give a big sniff, then he said, "Hell, it ain't no polecat makin' that stink, it's Frenchy Bordeaux'."

The old man noted with pleasure in his rheumy eyes that he had his audience now. Everyone in the Royal Flush was listening. The stranger was leaning forward, his interest wholly aroused, his drink forgotten.

"Frenchy, he put his glass very carefully on the bar, an' said, 'Well, well, zat mouth o' yours ees got no smaller, has eet, sonny? Fella stop by my camp couple weeks ago says you're beeg man now, wit' knife an' all. Sonny, let us see what beeg man you are wiz knife.'

"So Chuck, he jumped toward Frenchy, tryin' to get in the first lick, reachin' back with his right hand for that sharp knife o' his. Well, sir, in thirty seconds you never see so much blood as was coverin' Frenchy Bordeaux, from his chest to his knees."

The stranger could not contain himself.

"So he beat Frenchy to the draw, is that right?" he asked. "By God, he was a knife-fighter all all?"

The old man pulled at his beer.

"Weren't quite like that," he said. "You see, Chuck was fast, all right, after practicin' as much as he had. But he'd never drawn that knife in anger, like they say, an' mebbe he hurried it a mite too much. He cleared the sheath like greased lightning—Frenchy didn't even have his out yet—but Chuck, bringin' his knife back in front o' him got a leetle too close to his throat. Slashed it neat as you pleased and blood gushed out, an' all over Frenchy, like a mountain stream after the big thaw in the spring. He'd hit something Doc Bates called the jug-jug-jug . . . "

"The jugular vein," supplied the easterner.

"Yeh, that's it," nodded the old man. "Well, sir, Doc Bates was down at the end o' the bar, sloshin' gin as usual, an' he hurried over, but Chuck was dead as last summer's horseflies. You oughta go out to the graveyard, Mister, an' see the inscription on his tombstone. Chuck had nary a relative, no kinfolks, so the ranch went to the territorial government. But they gave the town money for a big funeral, and to buy a tombstone. Doc Bates an' our judge, they made up the words to go on it."

The stranger asked what the marker said, but the old man insisted he go see for himself, and the saloon regulars backed him up.

Next morning the visitor and about forty Quicksilver residents, including the old man, walked to the edge of town to the cemetery.

They proceeded to the most elaborate tombstone in the graveyard, and everyone stood back so the stranger could get an unobstructed view of what obviously was Quicksilver's chief claim to fame. He read the inscription aloud:

CHARLES BARLEY
1852—1877
Notched his gun twice;
Notched his throat once

DAME FORTUNE.

By Faye H. Neuerburg

"Oh, the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune." W.W.'s voice almost drowned out the tinny plinkin' of Gus' pie-ano. He looked down into his glass at the last inch of beer. It was like he hoped to dredge up the coin for another one there. "Yup. Yup, you're right." I agreed with him real fast 'cause I didn't want him to get started up ag'in. We were down to our last paid-for beers, dead broke with no prospects. Our elbows was dentin' spots into the top of the bar at Domedeon's Adelphi Saloon and Billiard Parlor. And as usual, I was sorry I'd went along with W.W. 'cause—just like usual—one of his cock-eyed schemes had blowed up in our faces. Here we was two drifters on the run. The least that could happen to us was that we could die of thirst right here and nobody would care. The worst was that Montezuma was a town of generally very solid type citizens and they rated our likes very low. We might even land in the pokey just for bein' broke.

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" . . . Fortune, that arrant whore, ne'er turns the key to the poor." W.W. groaned and looked pleadin' like at the barkeep. I groaned, too, on my inside, and gave up. But just then Dame Fortune (as W.W. always called what was gonna happen next) pushed in the swingin' doors of the Adelphi. At the moment I didn't recall her 'cause she was in the form of Gimpy Taylor and his boss, Big Jack O'Diamonds Dexter, who I had knowed from long before.

Happy hellos went round the room for Gimpy. He was a tough little Welshman, the best mining captain in these parts and one who couldn't be kept down by a broke up back and banged up legs. He was a favorite of all the workin' stiffs. For Big Jack, there came polite nods and tippin' of caps.

"Hi ya, boys." Gimpy raised a scarred hand to the crowd, movin' his head round to catch everybody. Then he limped after his boss and you could almost see how it hurt him across his uneven shoulders and hunched back. Right then, my own needs could go to the devil. I would have given anything to be able to make the warm kind of feelin' that old Gimpy did in that room.

The barkeep quickly set up a bottle of Kentucky bourbon and a glass for the Jack O'Diamonds. Then he drew some draft for Gimpy. Big Jack poured a finger and drank it down, his chest heavin' with satisfaction under his fancy flowered vest. He loosened the collar of his pink silk shirt and sez to the barkeep, "Jim, that's just what the doctor ordered. I was up all night over at the Franklyn House enjoying a little game of chance, and need to be perked up before the afternoon stage gets in. I've got some clients coming in—you know, real capitalists from the East—and I'm going to need a sharp mind to deal sharp." He winked and his wide, red face got a sneaky look on it. The room got real quiet. We all looked up to a man who could deal in mining properties.

I was marvelin' at the way Big Jack held himself, and was payin' no mind to W.W. Afore I could stop him. he was movin' toward that end of the bar. When I saw his sallow skin pull

tight over his cheekbones, and his expression change from the look of a poor down-and-outer to the look of a sly devil, and then to that saintly good neighbor smirk, I was afraid we was in for it.

He tapped Big Jack on the shoulder. "Are you not—I hope I'm not mistaken—but are you not Jonathan X. Dexter, the famous mining entrepreneur?"

"Yep, that's my moniker." Big Jack brushed a speck from the sleeve of his fine corduroy coat and looked at W.W. as if he was irritated.

"Well, I would like to offer my services to you. I am Winston Waverly Jones, lately of the Doctor Potter Medicine Wagon and Classical Lecture Caravan. But I have been associated with the Chautaugua Circuit and I am famous in the East for my interpretations of the Bard. I am sure a man of your stature and position often has need for talents such as mine."

"Yeah?"

"Yes. Now it so happens that my companion here, Carrots Crawford, and I are at liberty right now. We could begin any project that you might have in mind."

I didn't want to be drug into this, and I felt my face gittin' hot. I knowed that it had turned the color of burnt carrots in hobo stew 'cause when I was rattled my hair and freckles and face gits all the same dingy orange. That's where I git my nickname, "Carrots".

I made a quick move to grab W.W., and in movin' so fast, I knocked over the Jack O'Diamonds drink. Then it was like Dame Fortune had sat down on me with all her weight. I tried to mop up the bourbon with my shirt sleeve afore it could git on Big Jack's nice coat. All I did was to wipe it onto his striped pants. Old Gimp started to pull me away from his boss just when Jim, the bartender, came flyin' in with his bar rag. Somehow, he give me a push, and Gimp and I both landed on the floor.

Well, fer once, W.W. saved me. He stepped up between me and Big Jack Dexter, pushin' me to one side. "Move over, oaf,"

he whispered. He helped Gimpy to his feet and turned to the Jack O'Diamonds. With lots of humble pie in his mouth, he sez, "Please, sir, forgive my bumbling friend. He really means well, but sometimes his feet and hands move too fast for his brain."

I was waitin' for the roof to fall in, but it never did. "Get these guys out of here, Gimpy." Jack Dexter gave us a dirty look. But then he stopped, held up his hand. "Wait a minute, Gimp. Remember what I told you about needing a couple of working stiffs up at the Silver Wave to clear things out a bit before I show the New York people around? Well, take these two up and put them to work."

"Yes, Mr. Dexter. Come along, boys."

Afore we knew it, the uneven shoulders of Gimpy moved and his muscular arms was pushin' us through the swingin' doors of the Adelphi. In a matter of minutes we was climbin' the wagon road up to the Silver Wave, and our new jobs.

W.W. looked at me and scowled. I knowed he blamed me fer the way things had went. Under his breath he muttered, "Dame Fortune is a fickle gypsy, and always blind, and often tipsy." I accidently stumbled, tryin' to figger a way to make it up to him. He swore real loud. "You're the prize example of my gifts from Dame Fortune, friend Carrots."

Gimpy didn't seem to hear W.W.'s growlin'. He started up the hill at such a fast clip that we almost had to run to keep pace with him. All the while he was tossin' our orders back over his bent shoulders. "The first thing you boys got to do up at the Wave is to clean the rubble out of the main tunnel so's Mr. Dexter can show his prospects around. You hear me?"

"Yes, sir," I said. W.W. just muttered.

"Then there's the tracks to be cleared and you'll have to tidy up the bunk house if you're gonna bed down there." Old Gimp was sure a good mine captain. He knew just how to git a crew doin' two things at the same time.

We worked steady well into the afternoon. Then the chink-chink of metal ag'in trail rock come to us through the mine portal. Lookin' down to where the trail broke out of the timber, we seen four men on horseback slowly makin' their way

up the hill toward us. It was the Jack O'Diamonds and three others—city dudes in fancy suits, they was.

"Come on, boys. I think you better go work on the bunk house so's you'll be able to settle in this evening." Gimpy was real anxious to get us out of the way. I wondered why. I puzzled on it as me and W.W. trudged off toward the broken down cabin where we was gonna bunk.

W.W. was still talkin' to himself real mad-like. But as soon as we got inside the shack, he grabbed my arm and yanked me over to the window. I started to let go a yell but he threw his hand over my mouth so's that no sound came out. "Hush," he said. "Let's observe what's gonna happen."

"Okay," I said. But as far as I seen, they didn't do nuthin' out of the ordinary. They gabbed a little and then went out of sight into the tunnel. We could hear the ring of a pick on rock comin' out of the adit but we never did see anythin' else. Finally they came out.

"Hum,—so—" W.W. nodded his head wise-like as he watched the three dudes and Dexter climb back on their horses and go down the trail. I was just gonna ask him what he had seen when Gimpy called us back to work in the mine. We worked there until dark.

Next mornin' afore the sun was even up, W.W. and I was back in the tunnel on the first level of the Wave. Gimpy had made it real plain the night before that we was to start loadin' the ore cars good and early. W.W. was feelin' mean just cause it was mornin'. He kicked at some scattered wall rock and jammed the spike of his miner's candle into a crevice in the tunnel with an extry hard jab, just like he was tryin' to punish somethin'. Some pack rats which was scrunched there raced off towards the drippin' water sound deep in the mine. Somethin' in their movin' took his eye. He whistled, pulled the candle down from the wall and begin lookin' real close at the wall rock. "Well, my bumbling friend." He was not one to fergive and fergit. "Will you look here? Look at this ruby silver. It has no place in this mine tunnel." He crawled along the tunnel floor on his hands and knees. He peered at the place where the floor met the

wall. "Um, yes. Someone has been using a twelve gauge shotgun to help good old Mother Nature. Look at the hackneyed way the mineral is scattered."

In the dim light of our candles, I seen once ag'in how those brown eyes of his could glow just like Beelzebub's. His skin pulled tight over his high cheekbones and it seemed to me that there might be some horns pokin' out the top of his felt hat.

"Come along," he said. "Let's go toward that side drift ahead. I was wondering how the good Jack O'Diamonds Dexter managed to keep himself in the style to which he has become accustomed, especially in view of how much he gambles and loses."

He pulled at me, and unwillin' as I was, I follered him to where the drift took off. "Now look, W.W.," I sez. "Let's not rock the boat. Things are pretty good considerin' all that came about yesterday."

But he paid me no heed. He just moved his candle along, lightin' up the wall and whistlin' to himself. "My stars and Good Lord o'mercy. Will you give this a glance?" Just where the drift took off from the main adit, the wall rock changed its look. The sides of this tunnel was kinda spotted with dull, yet gleamin' brass-like specks. They was congregated over an area of about two feet square. W.W. took his pick from its holster and broke out a piece of the stuff. He hesitated it, peered closely at it through his lens, whistled ag'in and handed it to me. The piece was heavy, much too heavy for its size and I almost dropped it. Well, I had seen gold afore—you never fergit the way gold looks—and this was a pocket of native gold that we had found.

"You know, old Jack is not really very perceptive. Here is a small fortune in real gold, occurring naturally. Yet, because he is so lazy and greedy, he failed to inspect his property thoroughly. It was easier for him to concoct a wild cheating scheme—one that could not possibly work. In turn, my boy, we have found *our* treausre. Come along, let's go outside to the portal. I have to do some thinking."

"Ah—I don't know, W.W." But I scrambled, then stumbled after him.

We sat ourselves down on some big rocks near the tunnel opening. Even out here, W.W.'s eyes gleamed like they was Satan's and I thought I still seen what could be horns under his hat.

"Now, listen to me Carrots. We have only to whisk that ore out of here, and we are rich men."

"I'm not real sure about that, W.W. It's real hard to hide any high graded stuff. Maybe we should just leave it alone. Maybe we ought even to tell Dexter. He'd have to give us somethin' after you explained to him that you knowed about the saltin' he done."

"Don't be a fool. My God! Sometimes, I look at that innocent face of yours and wonder. You know what the good Ben Franklin said? 'Experience keeps a dear school, yet fools will learn no other.' " I didn't think that was exactly fair, but before I could come back at him, we heerd Gimpy Taylor's voice halooin' at us from down on the trail.

W.W. and me cussed and discussed, not gittin' anyplace. In a few minutes, the quick little Welshman hobbled up to where we was. On his back he toted a pack loaded with fuses, black powder and some other tools for blastin'. He sez to us, "I'm glad I caught you boys outside. Mr. Dexter wants me to do something a little special inside." W.W. winked at me. "I'll go in and look around," Gimp said. "I'm going to set a charge. I'll come out and blow it. You know, like always. Then I'll have to go in once more to check some things. When I call you fellows, come on in."

Gimpy, his tools on his back and a candle holder in his hand, went out of sight down the tunnel. W.W. and I went back to arguin' under our breaths ag'in. W.W. was makin' plans; me, I just tried to git rid of the strange feelin' I had. In no time, Gimpy was back. He lit the fuse he had pulled out with him. In a few seconds, there was that good dull sound of a charge set just right. Dust, the smell of burnt powder and the sound of

rock just settlin' down came from the adit. Gimpy grinned and walked back into the mine.

In just a few minutes, a long, shrill whistle came out of the tunnel. It was our turn to go in. W.W., his eyes glowin' like hell fire and his breath comin' in short gasps from his mouth, ran ahead of me. I follered but rocks kept gittin' in my way and I kept thinkin' that somethin' was doggin' my footsteps, reachin' around in front of me and tryin' to trip me up. I was uneasy and I begin to smell a stink that I knew damned well warnt there. My innards begin to slosh around.

Then it happened. Gimpy must have seen our candles from where he was standin' at the fork of the main tunnel with the side drift, 'cause he raised his arm. He motioned us to come on. From somewheres above him, we heerd the sound of crumblin' rock, and the next thing we knowed poor old Gimpy was laid out on the tunnel floor. We run up to where he was, and I will never fergit it. He lay there with the back of his head under a hunk of rock. His crippled arms and lame leg were throwed out like a rag doll's, his face down in the mud and water on the floor. It didn't take no second look to know that Gimpy Taylor was gone.

"Men at some time are the masters of their fates," W.W. grinned at me like a chessy cat. "It would seem, my dear Carrots, as if all has fallen very nicely into place, especially since the blast and rock fall did not really alter things here in the mine."

I just stood there glued to the tunnel floor, starin' down at poor old Gimpy. "Stop that gawking. Listen to me. We have a lot of work to do, and we must do it carefully."

He grabbed me and shook me. That funny smell became plainer and plainer. My head reeled, and I felt like a man does on the mornin' after a ten-day drunk.

But W.W. just wouldn't stop. "I will go down to Montezuma and report that there was a terrible accident," he said. "One in which the powder misfired, and because Gimpy was too close to the charge he was blown to bits. I will say that his body is in

such bad condition that it would be better if the remains were loaded into a coffin, the coffin sealed and never opened again. I will offer our services in accomplishing this deed. I will say that we are willing to spare those close to him—we will do the job."

I must have moaned 'cause he shook me. "Listen will you?" Then he kicked me. "While I'm gone, you get to work on that bundle of gold ore. Chip it *all* out, leaving as much wall rock as possible, but get every bit of the gold. Put the ore in those sacks that Gimpy carried in his pack. Don't load them too full—gold's very heavy—and we have to lift them. Umm—yes, and you might as well sack that stuff that Jack tried to salt, too."

"But W.W., how we gonna git the gold out of the casket?"

"Use your brains. This is July and a hot one. They'll have to bury the remains as soon as possible—today, even. We'll just go by the graveyard later tonight and dig up the box. And be on our way out of town to a new future, just like that." He snapped his fingers.

"What a God damned way to get rich!" I said. I was sick and disgusted.

He paid my poor condition no heed. He almost shouted at me. "For God's sake, leave your scruples. Put aside those virtures. Remember that a virtue to be serviceable must, like gold, be alloyed with some commoner, more durable metal." With that pile of malarkey, he went hummin' down the hill.

To git at the side drift, I had to move Gimpy's body. What with one thing and another, I was really stumblin' around and that odd ball stink was makin' my poor stomach churn. All of a sudden, I remembered what I was smellin'—sour beans and rancid fat back. I harked back to the time, then, that I had got lost in an early September blizzard up on the divide. I recollected how I wandered all around lost and almost fell off a cliff, losing all my supplies when I stumbled.

Hungry, half froze, mixed up, I was near dead when I seen a shack loomin' out ahead in the storm. Gatherin' the last of my strength, I plowed through the drifts and fell ag'in the door. It

opened and I dropped to the floor, the musty darkness of the cabin's insides swallowin' me up.

How long I laid there I don't know. The next thing I recollect is rollin' over on my back and seein' this little donkey stove sittin' in the gloomy room. On its top was a black pot. The lid for it was tilted off to one side. Thinkin' there might be food in the pan, I stiffly got up and went over to the stove.

Standin' there, I looked down at the funny white beans, the rubbery pieces of fat back and the dead mouse in the kettle. I got the funniest feelin'. I could almost have sworn that I wasn't alone, that someone was watchin' me. In spite of the stench, I was so hungry that I tossed the mouse toward the corner of the shack and fell to eatin', using both hands. I wolfed down everything left in the pot.

As the last bean slid down my throat, I saw something in the corner where I had slung the mouse. My God! It was Ole Maudie, the hag. She was sittin' there stiff and bent, her bulgin' eyes never once winkin'. She looked at me with a nasty sneer on her lips. The smell of sour beans came back strong. My belly ached. I knowed where I was. I'd stumbled into the den of this witch, this old gal who hated miners, who put hexes on everybody and caused all sorts of mysterious accidents. She even dared go underground into the mines.

Almost petrified with fear, I knowed I had to git out of there. But I seemed to be stuck in my tracks. When I did move, a chair got in the way, and I knocked it over. The bump of the fallin' chair seemed to startle Old Maudie and—oh Lordy—she started to git up. But instead she fell over sideways, funny and rigid. Then I seen she was dead. But dead witches is worse than live ones. I started to throw up. I ran out the door and back the way I had come. I fought the storm, retchin' puke every step of the way. But I didn't stop runnin'.

Somewhere along the line—I was lost ag'in—the storm began to die down. It warn't long until I run on to another cabin. There was smoke comin' out of the chimney, so I yelled out. The fellars inside came out and helped me.

Later on, I heerd that somebody found Ole Maudie's body in her shack. I never did tell that I had been there. But from that time on when things got bad for me—when I did somethin' wrong or when I was really scared—the odor of sour beans and rancid fat back came to me real plain.

It took W.W. about two hours to git back up the hill. He came ridin' a jackass, with another follerin' him—a pine box strapped to its back. He was grinnin' broad and sez, "By God, are we ever having the luck. They were so taken aback when they heard about Gimpy, that they practically turned the whole town of Montezuma over to me. Even Big Jack. He sent me over to Doc Armstrong's with the word that I be given any coffin I wanted."

"What about the jacks?"

"Well, that old skinflint, Tom Mugrage, said to me, 'Just take as many of my pack animals as you need! ' "

"Did they agree to the closed coffin and fast service?"

"Everything is hunky-dory. Let's get to work."

He was whistlin' all the while we was workin'. "Old Dame Fortune is a fickle gypsy. By God, is she not?" I just kept on doin' things and he fell to really helpin' me, fer a change. In no time at all, we was moving' down the trail; him riding' the jack he'd come up on, the other one carrying' the casket. And me, I was walkin', as usual.

At the edge of town, we was met by a delegation of the boys. They told us everybody was gatherin' at the graveyard up by the little white church. It seemed that Jack O'Diamonds Dexter wanted Gimpy to be laid to rest real quick, but proper like.

Sheriff Ted Newman quietly went over to W.W. "Sir, would you be willing to lead the service? You seem to have a knack with words. We want to give old Gimpy the best there is in Montezuma."

Winston Waverly Jones smiled all over. "I'd be most honored," he sez. I looked at W.W. closely. The devil look was gone and on his face was the saintly, good neighbor smirk. I could have sweared that there was a halo 'round his head 'cept

for the fact he was standin' with his back to the afternoon sun.

A little later, we all stood in the graveyard around a hole dug for the coffin. Standing in sort of a half circle in the last row of people was most of the miners, all the boys from the bars and livery stables, and a few drifters like me. They worked their hats in their hands and most of them had their heads bowed down. In front of this bunch, a row of parlor chairs from Fanny Sawtelle's boarding house was set up. Sittin' on one of these was Big Jack Dexter, dressed in his Sunday suit and sportin' a black band on his arm. Most of the womenfolk of Montezuma, the entire town council and all the store owners who could git away, took up the rest of the chairs. All in all, everybody who counted was there to give good old Gimpy a proper send-off.

"Friends, fair ladies and distinguished visitors. We have come together to say a fond farewell to one of our most dear comrades." W.W. looked real mournful and stopped talkin' fer a minute, like it was hard fer him to go on. One of the ladies sniffed. "Gimpy Taylor was a fine man and an excellent miner, and one whose peer we will not see again."

This made me feel real bad as I remembered what had happened up at the Silver Wave. I couldn't help lookin' up towards there and when I brung my eyes down, I found myself staring straight into the quizzical glance of the Jack O'Diamonds. He looked over at W.W. with the same expression and then back at me. A little smile come to twitch at the corners of his mouth. I wondered if he really missed Gimpy.

"But when all is said and done, we all know that 'dust must return to dust;' that 'ashes must return to ashes;' that 'the sailor comes home from the sea and the hunter home from the hill'. This miner is lucky because when he comes home from the mine, he will lie in that very soil that he loved the most. Let us pray."

Everyone more or less muttered the Lord's Prayer. Then the sound of gravel could be heard droppin' on the coffin's top.

The funeral party broke up into small bunches and most of the men went towards Domedeon's place, where the wake was

to be held. Some of the womenfolk and the Eastern guests was tellin' W.W. what a fine sermon he preached. While I waited for him, I begin gittin' sadder and lonelier. I was downright miserable, so I didn't see Big Jack standin' there for a minute. When I did look up, I was puzzled to see him looking real sneery. He started lookin' back and forth between W.W. and me. I was tryin' to figger him out when W.W. came up and sez, "Let's go on down to the Adelphi and drink to good old Gimpy." We left and I never did see what Big Jack done next.

Down at Domedeon's, Gus the pie-ano player, was mournin' over the keys while Goldie, the barmaid, sang a sad ballad. After a few drinks of Big Jack's likker, I cheered up a little. Rememberin' what a good guy Gimp had been, I begin to see the 'Divine Justice' (W.W. talked a lot about this 'Divine Justice') in poor Gimpy not having to suffer any more leg and back pains. Then, I recollected the high graded gold and I became happy. When Goldie brushed close and bent low to give me another drink, I thought how nice it was goin' to be when I could buy a few hours of company from some gal like her.

Suddenly, W.W. was at my side, shakin' my arm and whisperin' in my ear. "Come on. Time to get out of here. We collect, now." I scrambled after him into the dark night, but thinkin' real careful, fer once, about keepin' my feet and hands goin' the same way.

Outside, W.W. was workin' at the reins of two horses tied to the hitching rail. "Where'd those horses come from?" I asked. Then I saw each horse was loaded with a pair of saddle bags, ready to ride.

"Never you mind just now. *Help* me. Someday, we will have a lot to thank old Tom Mugrage for. Now, let's hurry."

We moved up the hill like shadows. In no time at all, we was at Gimpy's grave. W.W. had grabbed a lantern from somewheres, and he lit it. Just as fast he handed me a shovel and sez, "Start diggin'."

I dug so hard and fast that sweat was just runnin' off me. My feet was gittin' lower and it seemed that I should have gotten to

that black box, but I couldn't feel it or see it. I stopped to catch my breath and W.W. whispered at me, "Look how God damned crooked you've dug that hole. You're going to miss the box entirely. Move to your right about six inches."

Like always W.W. was right. It took about six more inches sidewise, and I hit the coffin.

"Get the lid off that thing. Speed it up." I had to strain to hear W.W., since I was movin' so fast. "Hand the bags up to me. I'll load them on the horses." It was a heavy stretch up fer me and a heavy lift down fer him, but we was doin' good. Then, another beam of light came over the edge of the pit.

"Evening, boys." Big Jack Dexter stood there on the other side of the grave, a lantern in his left hand and a forty-four in his right. "I had a hunch that you two had something up your sleeves." He bent down and real careful set his lantern on the piled up dirt. "Now, both of you, just keep doing what you're doing. When you get the gold all up here—I presume that it is gold you got there—I'll take the horses and go. Come on W.W., to work. Carrots, you watch your ape's hands and your clown's feet. I don't like mistakes."

I was scared. W.W. began to beg. "Ah, come on, Dexter," he whined, "we could all share."

Big Jack O'Diamonds smiled real dirty and shook his head. W.W. muttered somethin' about Fate—"Fate sits on these dark battlements and frowns."

We'd just started out to work along these new lines, when the shine from still another lantern topped the dirt pile above me.

"Hello, Jack . . . fellows . . . . I see we're lucky. We found you all together, right here." There stood Sheriff Ted Newman with Mayor Jonas Conwell and Trustee Sampson Ware. The Sheriff was carryin' a twelve gauge, and looked real sober. They begin to poke around and I stopped workin.' There was a feelin' in the air that said things was gonna change ag'in.

"Sheriff, I caught these two high grading gold out of my Silver Wave. That's the reason this bum, W.W., was so insistent that there be a closed-box service. Now, here they are

desecrating poor old Gimpy's grave." Big Jack blurted this out fast. I kinda felt he was tryin' to make a good excuse for bein' there. "You should arrest them."

"Maybe I will. But it's you, Jack, that I came up here to arrest." The Jack O'Diamonds' jaw dropped open as Ted Newman swung the shotgun to cover him.

"We are going to stop you from running away from your gambling debts. We also want to get back the cash that the Eastern people gave you for the Silver Wave—a mine we all thought worthless, but one which evidently contained a plug of pure gold. The gold now belongs to this Eastern company. You will also have to answer for such outright misrepresentation." Sampson Ware came up alongside of Dexter and gently took the forty-four out of his hands.

"Oh, come on now. You got it all wrong. Listen, Jonas—all three of you—you know me better than that. Sure, I've played five-card stud lately and lost a pile. But I'm good for it. I always settle up." Big Jack was tryin' to seem real innocent, but I heerd him shuffle his feet.

"Sorry, Dexter." Jonas Conwell shook his head. "You should find out more about people before you try to deal with them. It just so happens that this Mr. James Bartlett, the president of the new Silver Wave Mining Company, is an experienced mining engineer. After the news of Gimpy Taylor's accident got around, he started to ask some sharp questions."

Sampson Ware interrupted here. "Yeah, seems he was real suspicious in the first place about the specimens you showed them from the mine. He decided he should go up there and look—without your expert guidance—and see what was really there. So I took him."

At these words W.W. kinda jumped. "Yeah, we saw you two coming down and hid." Ware pointed at me and W.W.

"They found some mighty interesting things up at the Wave. For instance, there was Gimpy's pack, filled with black powder, fuses and some of this ruby silver that you, Jack, claimed was the kind of ore found in the mine. Bartlett said he figured it

couldn't possibly come from there and he was right."

As Ware spoke, Sheriff Newman grinned sorta bitter like. Ware went on. "And in the new drift, we found where somebody had taken out a great chunk of native gold ore—a freak in this country—but it *has* happened and it looks like the Silver Wave was one of the places where it did."

Ted Newman swung the gun 'round ag'in, pinnin' all three of us down real good. He sure didn't want nobody to run. Jonas shook his head sadly. "Meanwhile, I checked up on you, Dexter, down in town. Found out about your plans to skip. You should be ashamed. It was the most disgusting thing you did—using poor old Gimpy's loyalty to you. He would have given his life for you. I guess he did at that."

"Fair is foul and foul is fair . . . And Fortune, on this damned quarrel smiling, showed like a rebel's whore," W.W. put in. You could always depend on him to start up at the wrong time.

Big Jack Dexter must have seen he was beaten 'cause he laughed real bold and sez, "You guys must think you got me but you can't prove a thing. No evidence."

"Oh, but I think we can. We got this pack here, these sacks of high grade, and with Bartlett's testimony, we'll prove a lot." I couldn't see what was goin' on up on top still bein' in the hole, but I had the feelin' Jonas was pointin' things out, one by one. He spoke kinda disgusted like ag'in. "Let's get these guys

down to jail."

Sheriff Newman moved just a bit, but still keepin' us all pinned down with the shot gun, "Wait a minute, Jonas. Sam, I think you better stay here with the pack and the ore so nothing happens to them. Now, Dexter and Jones, you two turn around. Carrots Crawford, get up out of that grave. And don't fall over your God damned feet doing it."

The Sheriff rattled me and I moved real quick to do what he sez. But like always when the pinch come, my feet and hands worked agin each other. I started clawin' up the bank with my hands while my feet was spinnin' like a ground squirrel's hind legs, diggin' his burrow. Then the funniest thing happened. The dirt pile I had throwed up started comin' back on top of me.

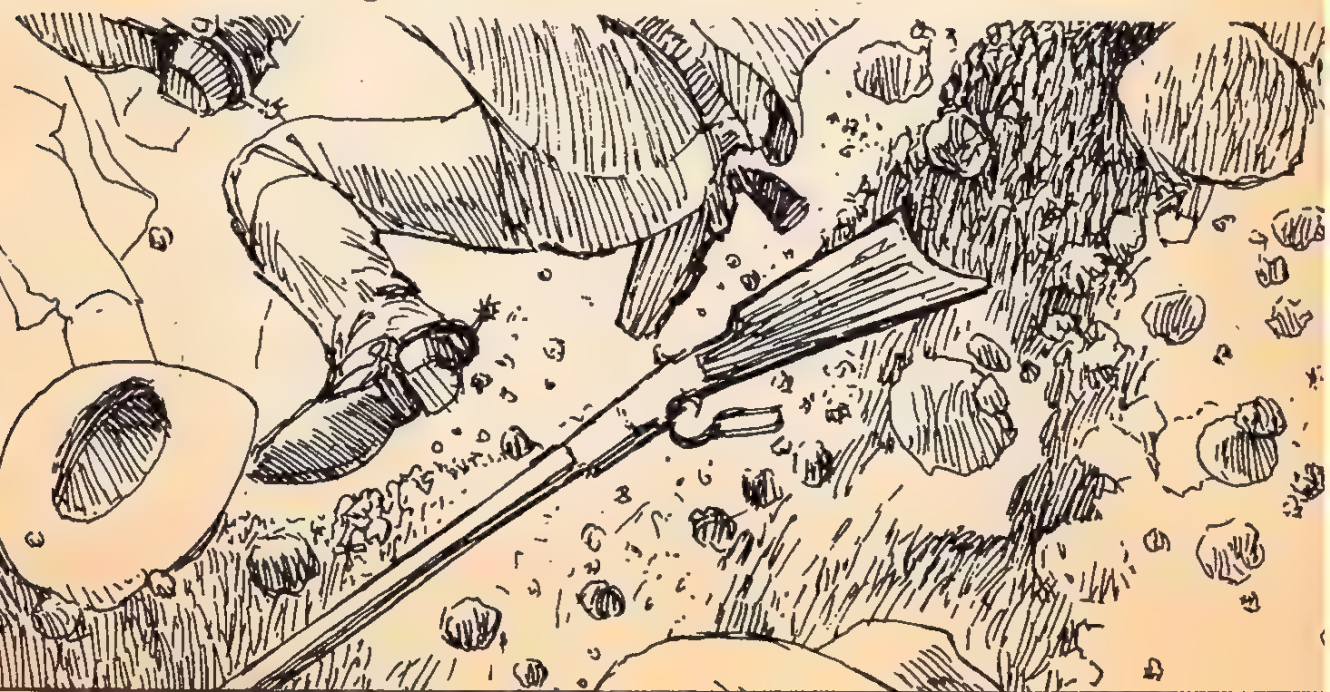
"For Pete sakes, Jonas. Watch what Carrots is doing. He's going to bury himself," Sheriff Newman shouted to Conwell.

I could hear the sounds of slidin' feet at the edge of the hole. Then, Jonas Conwell started swearin' a blue streak. He shouted, "Look out, Ted. Watch Dexter. He's loose—right behind you."

"God damn it, there goes my gun."

"Get out of my way, Sheriff. I'll kill you if I have to!"

"Jeezus Keerist!" Sam Ware's voice came in from a distance. "Watch where the hell you fellows kick that lamp. My God! It's going to roll into that sack of black powder! Let me over there, I got to get it!"



They was all shoutin' and swearin' and scufflin'. Just then someone came rollin' down into the grave, head over foot. I couldn't make out who. For some reason—in spite of bein' rattled—I got hand and feet holds and managed to pull myself to the lip of the diggin'. Next second I was out and runnin'.

It was a whole bunch of mistakes, but fer once good old Dame was with me, and things worked out real well. In the commotion, W.W. and Dexter made a run fer it. They untied the horses, which had been hitched nearby. They climbed on and headed out fast. I was half crawlin' and half runnin', but I managed anyways to grab ahold of W.W.'s saddle as he flew by. I pulled myself up behind him. The three of us got away.

A short time later, we came to the outskirts of Montezuma. Big Jack held up his hand.

"Which way?" W.W. asked.

"Quiet. We don't want to tip our hands. Best we head up St. John's Creek to the Swan Creek and down into Breckenridge. But be real quiet. If we don't attract attention, they won't know which of the three roads we took out of town." Then Jack O'Diamonds looked around real careful like.

"It'll take them a little while to get down here. You're right. The fools went up there on foot. When they do get back and finally get a posse going, they won't know which way to go." W.W. seemed to feel right confident ag'in. We creeped sneakily to the road along St. John's Creek and into the night.

That was the way W.W. and I come to be buddies of Big Jack O'Diamonds Dexter. Anyway, it was how W.W. and Big Jack come to be buddies.

After we come to the head of Swan Creek, we slowed down a bit and they begin to talk a lot to each other. They laughed and bragged about how many people they had gyped, and about all the tricks they knew for pullin' in suckers. "One born every minute," sez W.W. and Big Jack snickered and winked. I wondered where I come in, exactly. I noticed that as usual, I was walkin' while they were ridin'.

We come into Breckenridge about noon next day and went

directly toward the depot. We was broke and hungry and I couldn't see how we was gonna ride any train. Everything we had and everything we had got was lost in the Montezuma graveyard. We couldn't even sell the horses 'cause they had Tom Mugrages' brand on them. But nothin' seemed to bother either W.W. or Big Jack.

"Hey, look over there." W.W. stopped right in the middle of the main street and pointed.

"Yeah. I see what you mean." The Jack O'Diamonds eyeballed the four people W.W. had pointed at. Walkin' along the other side of the street was these strangers, a woman and three men, all duded up in fine clothes. It was easy to see that they were new to the West. They was strollin' along, talkin' excitedly and pointin' out the gold dredges down by the Blue, exclaimin' over the mine dumps on the hills and peerin' at the sort of stores there was in Breckenridge.

"What do you think?" asked W.W.

"Well, we might just give it a try," replied Big Jack. "I do own a claim here, you know—up in Frenchman's Gulch."

"Dame Fortune is a fickle gypsy, and always blind and often tipsy." W.W. was hummin' away. Big Dexter fixed the collar of his pink silk shirt and brushed his coat sleeves, grinnin' widely.

W.W. moved toward the party like a reverend greetin' rich church members on Sunday mornin'. The mountain sun was shinnin' all around his head, makin' his honest, good man smirk look real natural. Big Jack moved right along with him.

"Welcome. Welcome, friends, to the great West and to our bountiful mines."

All of a sudden, that smell of sour beans and rancid fat back hit my nose and made my innards churn. I recollected how poor old Gimpy Taylor had laid there in the mine tunnel. I saw Ole Maudie's eyes starin' out of the dark corner of her shack. I knowed I couldn't eat out of that pot ag'in. I had finally been learned better by 'Experience'.

"Goodbye," I sez. I turned and walked down to the road which led off toward Kremling, alone.

THE REPUTATION

By Dick Beaird

Matt Colby poured out a generous slug of imported whiskey and forced the stiffened fingers of his right hand to grasp the shotglass. When his hand trembled slightly, he cursed at it. Holding the offending hand in front of him, he stared at it with a mixture of frustration and anger. The fancy eastern sawbones at Abilene had called it arthritis, and had given him medicine for it, but it had done little good. Some mornings he could barely move the fingers.

He smiled bitterly. The famous Matt Colby, with a reputation that extended all the way to the border, and he couldn't outdraw a schoolboy anymore!

Moving slowly and deliberately, he managed to hold the glass

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and toss down a hefty slug of raw whiskey and that made him feel somewhat better. But it didn't change anything. Nothing ever would.

A heavy-set man, Matt Colby looked every inch the gunfighter, with faded blue eyes in a tanned, leathery face, eyes that held the unwinking stare of a rattlesnake, sloping shoulders, and finally an expensive, hand-tooled, oiled rig that held his well-worn Colt tied low on his leg. His long black frock coat and brocaded vest helped to create his deadly image.

Every schoolboy knew the name of Matt Colby, as did every waddy and would-be gunny from Texas to Oklahoma. And twenty men had seen the deadly speed of his draw just before a well-placed bullet smashed their aspirations into oblivion.

Cursing, Matt Colby pounded his hand on the polished desk top. If anyone ever found out . . . The thought was enough to chill him to the marrow of his bones. But so far no one had; his reputation was intact. He was still top gun in the territory all right, and everyone in Rossville knew it.

Colby turned with a start at the sound of footsteps on the porch. He swung his feet down from the ancient roll-top desk and turned to meet the man who burst through the door of his office. The intruder was tall and cadaverous with sunken eyes and a slack mouth. He halted just inside the door.

"Matt, there's a guy down at Tanney's asking about you. He's been all over town."

Colby pushed back from the desk and hooked his thumbs in his belt. "What's he look like?"

"He's young, hard looking. Walks with a swagger. He—he's a gunny, Matt! Wears his iron low-slung, butt forward, and rides a big roan with a fancy saddle."

Colby grunted. Hs fumbled in his shirt pocket for his makings, then jerked his hand away. No one knew it took Matt Colby ten minutes to build a smoke nowadays.

"Okay, Fred," he said carefully, his cold blue eyes slitted. "I appreciate your coming here like this and telling me. But what am I supposed to do about this would be shootist? He hasn't

broken any laws yet, has he?"

The tall man shrugged. "No. It's only that we—I—thought you should know about it. He looks mean as a sidewinder. He's been waiting in Tanney's place all morning, drinking, watching the batwings like a hungry coyote."

Colby nodded. "Keep your eye on him. Maybe I'll mosey on down later. I can't just come running every time some wet-nosed young punk rides in looking for a reputation. I got work to do, you know."

Turning, he dismissed the other man, who left quietly. Colby sat and stared at his hands. What the hell, he thought, in years past he'd go down there and let the kid call him and get it over with fast. But not anymore.

He stared at the name lettered on the door of his office. *Cattlemen's Protective Association.* A one-man outfit, and he was it. Every rancher in the territory paid him a fee each month, for which they received nominal protection. He thought about that, and about the room he had held virtually rent-free at Ma Logan's boarding house, for two years, and the free meals he got at Fred Binzer's beanery, and all the free booze he ran up on the cuff at Tanney's bar. Also the way people nodded respectfully when he passed them in the street, and how the men called him Mr. Colby, real soft-like, and the way the school kids congregated outside the big plate-glass window of his e and pressed their noses up tight and stared at the grea t Colby.

He couldn't afford to lose that. If he lost that—he would have nothing. He might as well be dead. He was going on forty-five, and he had nothing but the oiled, deadly gun at his hip and a few fancy duds and a hand-tooled Mexican saddle—not much to show for forty-five years of living.

But he still had his reputation.

He stood up and picked up his wide-brimmed hat. Could be that the far west boundary needed some checking on, he thought. He hadn't been over that way for a while. By the time he got back in two, three days, maybe things would be all right

again; no one could fault him for doing his job, what he was paid for.

He locked up his office and walked around toward Tod Barnet's livery stable where he kept his sorrel. A lone horseman rode down the dusty street of the town, slowly, hat pulled low against the thick heat of the day, but he showed no interest in Matt Colby. Colby's boots drummed hollowly on the rough boards and a fine dust stung his eyes. Yeah, today would be a good day to ride out and check over the Ralstad place, see if rustlers had been at the Ralstad herd again. Weather might even cool off real pleasant come night . . . .

He had almost reached the weathered front of the stable when he heard a voice behind him.

"Matt Colby!" it called out, too loud, too excited. The sound of his own name seemed to ring in his ears and make someting tighten between his shoulder blades. Slowly, he turned.

The man who stood just outside the batwings of Nick Tanney's place was squat and husky-looking, and he stood with his thumbs hooked in his belt, legs spread and braced.

"Matt Colby?" he repeated, but it was unnecessary. He knows who I am, Colby thought; it was obvious by the tense way he stood, as if something were coiled tight inside him. He was typical of his breed, one of a procession of gunslingers who had sought to help himself to an instant reputation at Colby's expense. But the reputation had kept them away for a long time, since not many had the nerve to try him.

Colby squared his shoulders and started walking back toward the center of town. It was too late to do anything else now. Everyone in town had heard the young gunny call him out, and already he could see faces appearing at the window of some of the weathered clapboard buildings. A cluster of people peered from the door of Snyder's general store. But there was no one else on the street. In the shimmering midday heat, Rossville could have been a ghost town, dozing under the sun, abandoned to the dust and the blowing tumbleweeds.

The husky, young man stood very still, only his eyes flickering under his battered Stetson. He looked like a cowpoke,

maybe, Colby thought, or a common ranch hand, not like a gunfighter at all. But he wore his gun like he knew how to use it, low and butt forward in the popular fashion.

Colby touched the butt of his own Colt and the feel of it was cool and familiar, but not reassuring. It would be useless. He might as well be unarmed. The worst part of it was that the whole town would see it. Dying wouldn't be so hard to take maybe—it would be the knowledge that they would all know that he had lived among them and off of them for two years, always taking what he needed when he wanted it, and that he had had nothing to back it up.

The sun beat like a fist on the exposed back of his neck, and he felt sweat pour freely under his arms. His hand began to knot with tension, aching dully. He would be lucky if he cleared leather before the kid's bullet slammed into his guts, he thought dismally.

Finally, Colby stopped. He looked at the other man carefully, out of his faded blue eyes. Colby's seamed face held no expression; he would die like a man, at least. He would do that much.

"I'm Matt Colby," he said then. "You wanted something, boy?"

He saw the quick anger in the other man's face, and the sudden twist of his lips. "I've come a long way," he said. "I guess you know why I'm here, Colby."

Colby sighed. "Yep. It's not the first time, you know."

Around him he could sense the eyes of the people of Rossville, boring down on him. They would get a show, he thought; their money's worth, all right.

He stood tall and alone, his gnarled, useless hand poised at the butt of the gun he would never draw again and his eyes looked only at the peaks of the mountains that bulked against a hot blue sky. That way he would not even see it coming.

He waited, but nothing happened. Then he looked over at the young gunslinger. Something was wrong. The man seemed to

sway, and then he clutched at his stomach and his face was congested.

Slowly, as if from a great height, the man crumpled to the dusty street.

Matt Colby sighed. It was all over; the kid had got a bad case of buck fever, apparently. Colby let his shoulders hunch forward tiredly and he suddenly felt very old. Turning he walked away.

Two men came out of Fred Binzer's restaurant, one carrying a small black bag in his hand; he crouched over the fallen man and checked his pulse and his eyes. Then he looked up at the fat man who stood over him, wearing a soiled apron.

"Reckon he'll be out about four hours," he said. "Be mighty sick when he wakes up, too. How much of it did he drink?"

The fat man shrugged. "I put the whole dose in his bottle. He kept slugging it down real slow for about half an hour, so I guess it took a while."

"All right. Let's get him up to my office. After he sleeps it off, I'll break the hard news to him."

The fat man grinned slowly. "What are you going to tell him, Doc?"

The Doc squinted. "Probably that he has a rare blood disease, and the only man who can save him is some specialist in Houston. I figure he'll light out of here like a mule with a firecracker on his tail."

The fat man watched the broad back of Matt Colby walking slowly back to his office.

"You done a great job, Doc," he observed. "I guess it's tough on the kid, but what else could we do? We got to protect *our* reputation, too. Wouldn't do to let the whole territory know that Rossville's famous top gun couldn't outdraw my six-year-old daughter!"

The fat man turned and gazed at the hazy mountains in the distance. Without Matt Colby and his reputation to keep the town peaceable and free of drunken drovers, where the hell would any of them be?

THE ROCKING-CHAIR SHERIFF

By H.G. Merz

The town of Tom's Pass baked in summer's noonday heat. Sheriff Miles Meeker sat on his shaded porch, rocking slowly. A faded and battered hat, pulled forward over iron-gray hair, shielded the keen eyes, in a tanned and weather-creased face, from ground-reflected sun.

The chair in which he rocked was worthy of note. It was an

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unusual chair, with unusual capacity, as it had to be to contain the sheriff, for, as it had been said, "It's a special-built chair for a special-built man!"

That the sheriff was "special-built" was putting it mildly. He was, by actual measurement, six feet two inches tall and two feet and eleven inches wide, but his exact weight was unknown for he steadfastly refused to step upon a scale. He had to use a buckboard for his trips throughout the county, since it would have been unfair to expect a horse to carry him.

It had not always been so. In his early days, he had been light-footed, both on and off a horse, and lawful vengeance had come like a whirlwind. But, now, he was fat and living proof of that law of physics which states that large masses must move slowly. Slower than slow, folks said, that was Sheriff Meeker, but as inevitable as taxes and death. Nevertheless, he could and did enforce the law and the county prospered accordingly.

For if the sheriff was slow physically, he lagged in no other way. He had a mind hair-trigger in sensitivity and his eyes were evidence of that. Blue-gray, deep-set, in that wide face, they were as alert as a prowling cat and as active as scudding clouds on a gusty day.

Right now, his eyes were fixed watchfully on the dapper person of "The Dandy Kid" as he lounged, across the street, before Ike Morgan's saloon. The Kid, from his rakishly tilted Stetson to his daily-polished boots, was a desert fashion plate, if ever there was one.

In turn, The Kid was staring, with studied insolence, at the vast figure of the sheriff. Then, with a contemptuous shrug, he addressed a remark to a companion in leisure that brought a shout of laughter.

The sheriff knew the sally had been at his expense. For The Kid, though only a month in Tom's Pass, had made that month a vexatious one, taking great delight in tormenting, deviously, the guardian of the law, often saying small annoying things that stung, over card tables and at the bar.

The Kid, however, had done nothing to warrant action. He

had carefully refrained from placing himself beyond the pale of law-abiding men. Though a fancy shot—a trickster with a gun—The Kid had avoided gunplay.

The sheriff suspected The Kid was a coward whose overwhelming vanity would not permit him to concede, outwardly, that he knew fear, and, indeed, he concealed it so well that only one with the sheriff's experience and insight could detect the vein of yellow.

The lawman had read The Kid, and, having read him, waited. Sooner or later, propelled by his conceit, The Dandy Kid would come into conflict with law and order.

"High-Spade Pete" Redfield drew up on his horse and eased his gangling figure from the saddle at Ike Morgan's hitch-rack. Before he turned to the saloon, Pete waved a hand, ingratiatingly, at the sheriff, he always making it a point to curry favor with the law. Being, perhaps, a shade less cowardly than The Kid, he carried no gun, on the theory that no one would shoot an unarmed man and, so far, he had been right.

When Pete and The Kid, after a brief powwow, went through Ike's swinging doors, the sheriff knew a game of stud had been born. Pete, an inveterate gambler, would bet on anything, preferably a card, while The Kid had loudly maintained that Stud Poker was his own special dish.

"Maybe, when The Kid tangles with Pete," the sheriff mused, "the dish will lose its savor."

It was not a full hour later that Ike Morgan came to his door to hold aloft two fingers to the sheriff. That signalled trouble brewing. Quickly—quickly for him, that is—the sheriff crossed the street.

The lawman's unvoiced surmise of Pete's ability to outplay The Kid had been borne out by the facts. The Kid had lost steadily—both his money and his head—and the climax had come when Pete had drawn to a flush to beat The Kid's three ambitious treys.

Seizing on the fact that High-Spade Pete had dealt, The Kid gave rein to his tongue, first, however, setting his hand for a

draw. He said, insinuatingly:

"You're right slick, Pete, with a deck of cards!"

"Meaning what?" Pete asked, his hands openly on the table, as all nearby space was being hastily vacated.

"Meaning you're crooked!" The Kid snarled, edging his hand for another inch of advantage.

"You know I don't carry a gun," Pete said, nervously, hoping somebody had gone for the sheriff.

"Why?" The Kid blustered, supremely confident of the upper hand. "Afraid it might go off?"

"I'm not a gunsel. I don't need a gun. You—you're different," Pete added, with the cunning of desperation. "So let me see how much nerve you have. If you want to use that gun, I'll give you a chance—to shoot for money!"

"For money?" The Kid was interested, since he had the knowledge he was a pretty good shot.

"For money!" Pete nailed down his advantage, knowing he had averted a bullet. "You can shoot for everything I won—and my own stake to boot. But I have to name the card and call the shot."

"And where do you come in, if I lose?" The Kid asked.

"You give me your gun."

"Which keeps me from drilling you! Dumb as a fox, ain't you, Pete?"

Pete smiled weakly. The sheriff should be arriving soon, he was thinking, as he said, "I'm giving you a chance to get your money back—and mine with it! If you're as good a shot as you think you are, you'll take me up!"

"Why not?" The Kid was more affable at the prospect of retrieving his losses.

It was then Sheriff Meeker arrived, pushing his weight through the wary bystanders. "What's going on here?" he demanded.

"Well, if it ain't our little old sheriff, come up out of his rocking-chair!" The Kid taunted. "How does it feel, sheriff, to move your feet along the ground?"

"Never mind my feet!" the sheriff snapped. "I asked what's happening?"

"Nothing to worry your head about, sheriff!" The Kid was feeling cocky; the sheriff could not intervene in what was merely a shooting match. "It's just a bit of friendly fun!"

"I'm not so sure it's friendly!" The sheriff was dubious. "How about it, Pete?"

"Like The Kid says; it's just a little game," Pete replied, changing his mind, in the safety of the sheriff's presence, about the card he meant to name. "The Kid, there, is going to shoot the eye out of the Jack of Spades!"

"So that's the trick!" The Kid snorted, for he had been figuring on shooting at the Ace. "Why don't you make it hard, Pete, like dusting a fly off the church steeple?"

"Why should I make it easy?" Pete was gaining courage with the sheriff right there. "I am laying big odds, hombre."

"I might just do it, at that," said The Kid, "if you will sort of improve the target?"

"How?" Pete wanted to know.

"Got nerve enough to hold the card, yourself?" The Kid jeered, aiming to frighten Pete out of the shooting-match so that he could shake him down later, when the sheriff was not about.

"Sure, I'll do it! At ten paces!" Pete agreed, knowing the match had to be settled, for safety's sake, in the sheriff's presence.

"Then let's start the dance." The Kid was play-acting, being The Big Man With A Gun.

"Then you can do it out in the street," the sheriff interposed. "I'll stick around, in case of accident."

In the street, The Kid paused for a moment at the side of his cayuse, while he checked his gun. Then, after Pete had taken a stand and had extended a Jack Of Spades between thumb and forefinger, The Kid stepped off ten paces and turned.

"Shoot!" Pete challenged.

The Kid aimed carefully and pulled the trigger. There was a sharp report and the card fluttered to the ground. But Pete lost no time in regaining it. He glanced at it, quickly, then shouted triumphantly, "I win—you lose!"

Rage and hate, swift and overpowering, blazed from The Kid's eyes. His gun spoke again, and Pete fell—or had he already been falling? The sheriff had received that impression, for it seemed to him that Pete, forewarned that The Kid would shoot, had flopped to the ground.

In only a moment, the sheriff had grasped the facts, but that moment had been too long. The Kid was already moving. His weapon was covering the astonished crowd as he side-stepped swiftly to the sheriff's side.

"Lift 'em up, Fatty!" he ordered.

There was nothing else to do. With a .45 in his side, Sheriff Meeker raised his hands, well aware that a weapon in a coward's hand is doubly dangerous.

The Kid deftly lifted the gun from the lawman's holster.

"Now, back up!" he directed.

Keeping the sheriff's bulk between himself and the onlookers, The Kid retreated to his horse. When he leaped to the saddle, his gun, and the sheriff's, still dominated the scene.

"I hate to leave you, Fatty!" he laughed.

"You'll be back, Kid!" the sheriff said, quietly.

"Maybe you will bring me back?"

"You can bank on it!"

"Then you'll have to switch—to a rocking-horse!" The Kid sneered, and, with a last snorting laugh of derision—or, perhaps, appreciation of his joke—he wheeled his mount and sped his way through the street.

"Let him go, boys!" the sheriff counseled, as several six-guns flashed belatedly into view. "You might hit something!" He turned from the sight of the fleeing Kid. "How's Pete?"

"Fine and dandy!" Pete answered the question, himself, as he rose to brush the dust from his clothes.

"Maybe not!" the lawman disagreed. "Come along to my

office!"

"I'm not under arrest, am I, sheriff?" Pete worried. He didn't think the sheriff, humiliated by The Kid, should take it out on him.

"Not yet. Leastways, not until I find something to charge you with. But I want to talk to you."

Pete needed no further command. Anyway, he was safer with the sheriff and, in the latter's office, he sat in the chair that had been indicated.

"Let me have that Jack Of Spades!" the sheriff demanded.

Pete surrendered it, reluctantly.

"I'd like to keep it. It's a lucky card," he said.

"It almost got you killed, didn't it?"

"That's why it's lucky. I didn't get killed!"

"Well, maybe that's logical," the sheriff remarked, sarcastically. "But I may need the card. Who started the ruckus anyway?"

"Not me!" Pete defended. "I beat The Kid, fair and square, at Stud, but he squawked. He was looking for an excuse to drill me and getting him to make that trick shot was my way of talking him out of it. And it worked! But, do you know, sheriff," Pete complimented, "it wasn't such a bad shot. The Kid didn't miss by much!"

"Maybe he won't miss, if he comes back," the sheriff said. "Have you given any thought to leaving town?"

"If you say so, sheriff!" Pete took the hint.

"But, if you're smart, you won't go the way The Kid went," the sheriff warned.

"Don't worry!" Pete was already on his feet. "I'm riding just the opposite."

That night, at Ike Morgan's, the sheriff lingered with a friend. He had deliberately chosen a place at the bar near a group of several of The Kid's former friends. The sheriff's voice rose a trifle as he made the assertion:

"I tell you, it was a perfect shot!"

He paused to let the words sink into the minds of the in-

terested listeners, then went on, "And to tell the truth, I didn't think The Kid could do it!"

A listener strolled over. "I'd like to see that card, Sheriff," he said. "Do you know who picked it up?"

The sheriff's laugh boomed loudly.

"High-Spade Pete picked it up. He gave me the card just before he high-tailed it out of town. Said he wanted no more truck with this place."

"But I thought The Kid missed," remarked another listener.

"See for yourself!" The sheriff produced a Jack Of Spades, the eye of which had been neatly oblitereated by a .45 slug.

The Kid's former friend spoke up. "Looks like Pete welshed!" he said. "He saw that he lost and lied right quick to save himself from paying off!"

"Still, you can't blame him," another put in, "when you remember the only reason he made the bet was to keep The Kid from plugging him right at the card table!"

Every man in the saloon was now jammed about the bar, begging for a look at the card that they might admire the evidence of a remarkable shot.

"Yes, this is an example of great shooting!" the sheriff praised. "I don't blame you folks for wanting to look at it. It shows what a sharp eye and a steady hand can do."

He held up the card admiringly, as he continued, "Tell you what: I never liked The Kid, but I sure have to hand it to him for this kind of shooting, so I'm asking Ike to stick it up over the bar where everyone can see!"

"Glad to do it, sheriff," Ike assented. "Give it here!"

For a week, thereafter, the card was displayed on the mirror behind the bar and business at Ike's increased. Strangers rode in from other towns to see the punctured eye, while the shot bade fair to become legendary.

And each day, through all that week, the sheriff sat on his chair on the shaded porch, napping in the heat. He was sleeping days, naturally, because he was watching at night, for, sooner or later, and the sheriff thought soon, The Dandy Kid would sneak

in to see for himself the evidence of his super-marksmanship.

The Dandy Kid trotted his horse warily onto the long rambling street that was Tom's Pass. It was late and those not asleep were gathered in the various night-spots of the town, but The Kid rode carefully.

Approaching Ike Morgan's, he slowed to a walk and noted the light in the sheriff's office across the street. "Fatty must be up late tonight," he thought and spurred his mount to a faster pace as he rode around the end of town and sought Ike Morgan's rear entrance.

Dismounted, he led his horse carefully forward. With his hand on his holster, he nervously inched through the dark to the door. Leaving his horse, he entered.

He wasn't noticed until he was almost at the bar. Thereafter, he knew that all eyes were upon him, and, knowing it, although his heart was pounding with trepidation, he tried to play a real gunsel's part.

"Howdy, Kid!" Ike Morgan greeted with a disarming smile.

"Howdy, Ike!"

"Come to see for yourself?" The saloon-man indicated the card on the mirror.

"No," The Kid lied, "I was just passing through and thought I'd drop in." He surveyed the card critically. "Not a bad shot, if I do say so, myself!"

"Wish I could do as well," flattered Ike. "Have a drink!"

"Just one!" The Kid gulped his drink hastily, then said, "Well, I guess I'll be going!"

The Kid departed slowly. His heart was pounding, but he felt he had to put on a show. He wanted to run—get out of the damned place—but, unfortunately, it was impossible to run with face-saving dignity.

"I'll be in again!" he bluffed.

He was at the rear door. He had to put all his weight on each foot to keep them from running. His tongue, despite the drink he had had, was thick in his mouth. He—he needed air!

He was through the door. He was in the friendly protective darkness. He dropped his pose. He sped lightly to his horse and up into the saddle.

From the darkness—suddenly no longer friendly, but full of menace—the sheriff's voice ordered:

"Halt! You're covered!"

The Kid dug his spurs into his mount. The cayuse was off like a shot, with The Kid bent low so no bullet could rake him.

And then the horse was gone like the wind and The Kid was flat on the ground, stunned and breathless after the fall.

The Kid had begun to come around. He sat up with a groan and tried to feel his head but his hands had been cuffed.

"You would have had better luck out front, Kid," the sheriff advised, belatedly. "I had the light burning in my office only to shoo you to the back. Of course, you were a fool to come back at all; not so much for the attempted murder charge, but for stealing my gun. You should have known I wouldn't let you get away with that!"

As The Kid, still shaken, maintained silence, Sheriff Meeker drawled on: "Of course, too, I could have thrown a shot at you when you were in the doorway, all lit up. But there was no need for that. I had you cold. So, while you were at the bar, showing-off, I roped your saddle with the other end on a hook, and then, to save your horse from being pulled-up too hard, I cut your saddle-strap a little bit."

The Dandy Kid was still The Dandy Kid!. "Yeah, you got me all right, Sheriff, but you were just lucky. I came back by myself!"

"No, you didn't!" the sheriff disillusioned. "I brought you back. I tore up the card you shot at and then I shot a hole in the eye of a second Jack—the one that's hanging over the bar!"

"You mean you fixed it that way—and spread the news—to make me come back?" The Kid asked, incredulously.

"That's exactly what I did, Kid!" the sheriff said. "And then I just sat back in my rocking-chair and waited!"

Award winning western novelist ELMER KELTON has a new book out, and it is a winner. THE GOOD OLD BOYS (Doubleday, $8.95) is set in the summer of 1906 and follows the trials and tribulations of roving cowboy Hewey Calloway. Finished with punching in New Mexico, Calloway goes to west Texas to work with his brother on his mortgaged farm. Calloway runs into some trouble that causes his brother to get beaten up, but in the end settles into the routine of farm life. This is a very real story, about characters who come to life as real cowboys. Elmer Kelton fans won't be disappointed.

MATT BRAUN, author of last months short story *The Road To Hell* has signed an agreement with TV producer David Gerber to turn Braun's novel *The Kincaids* into a two hour movie for television, with a possible series spin-off for next season.

I, TOM HORN a First Artists picture to star Steve McQueen has been slowed down by production difficulties, and it may be several more months before this picture gets underway.

For western collectors COLT FIREARMS has brought out a new commemorative set of guns. Honoring the U.S. Cavalry, the set includes a brace of Model 1860 Colt percussion revolvers, fitted shoulder stock, powder flask and bullet mould. The whole sheebang is handsomely cased in a fitted walnut chest, and would make a fine addition to any western collection.

A new catalog of western books is now available from the ARTHUR H. CLARK COMPANY, 1264 So. Central Ave., Glendale, California 91204. Publishers of Western Americana for more than seventy years, their printing of mountain man Jedediah Smith's account of his 1826 journey to California ranks as one of the best western books to come out in at least a decade. Priced at $24.95 it should be in every western library.

SO LOUD THE TORRENT by R.C. House is this writers first full length western novel, and it is a good one indeed. Bart Smith, the gentle frontiersman who figures as the hero in this well crafted yarn, is on his way to rescue fellow buckskinner Jed Freeman from the Gros Ventre Indians, but is hampered by the presence of Freeman's wife who insists on going along. Inside Indian Territory the action comes hard and fast, with Smith having to cope with Indians, stampedes and a raging prairie fire. The story is engrossing, and told in fascinating detail. Published by North Star Press it is well worth the hard-bound price of $6.95.

Two of the very best WESTERN ANTHOLOGIES are very hard to find on dealers racks. Published in conjunction with the Western Writers of America's Silver Anniversary, these two volumes contain reprints of some of the best in western fiction. SPURS (Bantam Books, $1.95) contains twenty five stories that have been recipients of that most prestigious western literary award, the WWA Spur. Likewise, the WESTERN WRITERS OF AMERICA SILVER ANNIVERSARY ANTHOLOGY (Ace Books, $1.95) contains fourteen powerful stories by WWA members, some published here for the first time, while others, as in *25 Spurs* have originally appeared elsewhere. If you enjoy western fiction, have your local dealer order these two books for you. They are well worth having.

In the realm of fiction there are several new and not so new titles heading toward your local bookstore. Best bets this month include:

CATTLE ANNIE AND LITTLE BRITCHES, by Robert Ward, *Morrow.*

GUN COUNTRY, by Wayne C. Lee. *Ace* (original).

MURDER AT MAGPIE FLATS by Kelly Gast. *Doubleday* (original).

THE FERGUSON RIFLE, by Louis L'Amour. *Bantam* (reissue).

THE KILLINGS AT COYOTE SPRINGS, by Lewis B. Patten. *NAL* (reprint).

THE LAST CATTLE DRIVE by Robert Day. *Avon* (reprint).

THE MANSVILLE BRAND by W. G. Schreiber. *Avalon* (original).

THE PEACE KEEPER by Ray Hogan. *Doubleday* (original).

THE RIMROCKER and THE OUTLAWED by Ray Hogan. *Signet Double Western.*

THE TREASURE OF FAN TAN FLAT by William O. Turner. *Berkley* (reissue).

THREE FROM THE WEST (RIO DESPERADO, QUICKTRIGGER, VOICE OF THE GUN) by Gordon Shirreffs. *Ace* (reissue).

VOYAGE TO SANTA FE, by Janice Holt Giles. *Avon.*

The Los Angeles Corral of the Westerners has published its fifteenth annual Brand Book, perhaps the most lavish of this well done series. BRAND BOOK XV contains fourteen historical essays dealing with the west, ranging from a fascinating article on the Nang Po, a Chinese junk that plied western waters at the turn of the century to a profile on Burt Procter, one of todays top western artists, and a fascinating look at the Sunkist Orange empire. The book is nicely bound and well illustrated, with several laid-in prints of Burt Procter's more famous works complimenting the well edited text. Printed in limited edition, Brand Books become collector items almost the moment they are printed. Priced at $25.00 BRAND BOOK XV is available from The Westerners, 1264 So. Central Ave., Glendale, CA 91204.

THE TUBAC TREASURE

By Michele A. McQuaid

aleb Quint was a scavenger. That was why he had come to Tubac, Confederate Arizona Territory, and that was why he was riding toward the woman's beckoning hand. She was leaning over the low, pink, adobe wall, and she started speaking before he reached her, "Caleb Quint, I want to hire you." He looked at her carefully. She was a full bodied woman in her late twenties, molded into her blue dress, a matching feather stuck into her top-knotted, fine, desert sand hair. Her eyes, appraising him, were queer—large and almond shaped, shifting with a

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change in mood from topaz through grey and hazel.

"Why?" he asked.

"You have the reputation of being a hard man. Unscrupulous by some standards. You're certainly not one of the Virginia Quints anymore than I'm a lady. I'm Octavia Wilkes. I'm a camp follower. And I intend to get out of Tubac before the Apaches raid again. I don't intend to become bait for the red ants."

"Where do you want to go?"

"Tucson. I need you to escort me. You will be handsomely paid for your time."

"When do you want to go?"

"Tomorrow. I'll have my things together by then."

"All right, see you first light," he started to turn his horse from the wall.

"Quint, one more thing. You're getting paid for escort duty. Nothing more. I've never given it away."

"And I've never paid for it, Mrs. Wilkes, so we understand each other."

Quint rode deeper into Tubac, slouching a little, the streets darkening in shadow, evening cooking clatter and smells welling up from the walled houses he passed. A stiffening wind rustled through peach and pomegranate orchards, rippling the water standing in irrigation ditches. Quint had mixed feelings about towns like Tubac. He found them welcome oasises from the dust and heat, but their stability threatened his livelihood. He could only make money out of destruction.

He was here in Tubac because it was marked. Octavia Wilkes was smart to get out. Between the Apache and bandit raids and the soldiers gone East to fight in the war, he bet Tubac wouldn't be standing six months from now. In the meantime, there was money to be made as he was doing with Octavia Wilkes, and later by trading off left behind valuables and by bushwhacking.

He was now in the oldest part of town, the Plaza, yellow light already pooling on the street from the squat, adobe *cantina,* hunks of whitewash peeling from its side. Tubac was an old town, founded by de Anza in 1774. It had never been

destroyed, although the Yumas had closed the de Anza Trail for fifty years, its population wanning and waxing with economics. Since the mid 1850s, it had enjoyed a boom when Chalres D. Poston and Herman Ehrenberg had developed the Heintzelman mine thirty miles away. Their strike had drawn other prospectors, so that now the population was around eight hundred, five-sixths of it Mexican, but since the firing on Fort Sumter that number had dwindled. Qunit was tired and thirsty. He kneed his mount over in front of the *cantina,* smelling as he dismounted the strong, yeasty odor of Mexican beer and the tang of wild onions, peppers and cheese. Quint was a tall, big man, hard and thick in his legs, and thighs, with arms like a swimmer, but soft in his belly if he relaxed it. His hair, the color of muskrat, was thick and kinked when wet. His eyes were lynx like, yellowing into green. When he wasn't shaved, like now, his dark brown stubble was mixed with grey.

He went into the *cantina,* took a table, and ordered beer, chicken rolled up with wild onions and peppers and yellow cheese in a tortilla, and beans, thick and mashed. Afterward, he would have tequila.

He looked around the crowded, noisy room, Spanish and English clammering for dominance, tin plates and utensils scrapping together, glasses tinkling against each other, thudding down on wood. He fit right in with the mixture of Gringo miner and Mexican peon. No one would notice or remember him. The talk he picked up as he ate was all the same: the latest Apache attack on the outskirts of town, the threat of the Mexican Espejo's raids, who had refugeed to Tucson and Mesilla, who would be the next to go.

He wondered then about Octavia Wilkes. How rich was she? How much of her wealth would she be carrying with her on her way to Tucson? Surely, on the basis of their first meeting, she would not have stayed in Tubac unless it had been profitable. Probably she had had the mine superintendents and the army officers before they had withdrawn. Well, if she was loaded, it was certain, she would not reach Tucson with it. It was just that

he hadn't decided yet if he should kill her.

Quint drank his tequila, and then got up to go. He paid for his meal in American dollars, not having any of the Tubac, paper *boletas,* the picture of the animal they bore determining their value in silver. Then he went outside, mounted his horse, and headed back through the quiet, warm streets to Octavia Wilkes'. He had not told her about the Apache raiding party he had seen worrying the hills not far away. There was no point in looking a gift horse in the mouth. He would protect his investment.

It was coolest just before dawn, heavy dew coating the tall grass between peach and pomegranate trees. Quint's shirt front was wet with it and with nervous sweat. Squirming around to unstick the flannel from his belly, he saw a kerosene lamp flame on in one of the house windows. Good. Octavia Wilkes was awake. He'd give her a few minutes to get dressed before telling her they were leaving early. He hoped to avoid the whole mess. Then he heard it, the quiet splash of a body easing into the irrigation ditch beyond the orchard.

Quint leaped to his feet, running back toward the house, hurdling the low, pink, adobe wall. He hammered on the front door until he heard her quick footsteps on the tile inside. He would have preferred going in through a window, keeping his position secret, but they all had sturdy, iron bars covering them and were heavily shuttered on the inside. When she opened the door, he grabbed her wrist, jerking her outside, "Come on, let's go!"

In the dimness, Octavia's eyes were huge and bright topaz. "Apaches?" He could smell her fear.

"In the irrigation ditch. They'll be in the orchard in a few minutes." He took a couple of steps toward the Tubac side of the house, jerking her after him.

"Wait, my money," she pulled free, running back into the house.

He ran after her, shouting, "I thought you didn't want to be red ant bait!"

Quint found her kneeling in front of the parlor hearth, a money bag beside her, stuffing stones back into holes deep within the bed. He was in time to see she was covering a large, metal box.

"I'm not going without something! I worked too damn hard!" she bit back at him, getting to her feet.

This time she ran with him back around the side of the house, clambering over the wall. Quint could make out the shadows of their horses when he crashed into the man. There was a sharp explosion of exhaled breath as Quint jammed his knee into the man's groin, cracking him with locked fists over the back of the neck as he buckled forward. For good measure, he kicked him hard in the ribs, knocking him flat on a wistaria vine, fragrance from the crushed flowers welling up into Quint's nose. Then Quint grabbed Octavia's arm, rushing forward again, "Come on. We've wasted enough time."

"Wait." She set her feet. "That man is no Apache. We can't just leave him here." Wrenching free, she dropped beside the man, peering into his face. "Quint, help me. I know this man. It's Carson MacNamara, a friend."

"There isn't time, Mrs. Wilkes. Leave him."

"No!"

He locked eyes with her, his thick cheek muscle writhing. It would serve her right if he snatched that money bag and left her there with her friend. Too late then, the Apache canting filling the stillness. Involuntarily, Octavia and he shivered. He knew the Apaches were through the orchard. Seconds now, and then they'd be found. MacNamara groaned. "All right," Quint snapped, "but let's hurry up. Help me."

Quint got his hands under MacNamara's arms and hauled him up. The man, half conscious, swayed until Octavia got her arm around his waist. The three, cripple crab fashion, started toward the horses; Quint could see MacNamara's mount was tethered only a little distance from Octavia's and his.

The scream, shrill and piercing, broke out behind them. Quint, letting loose of MacNamara, whirled, yanking free his

army Colt forty-four. The Apache, fat, brown, the red and blue paint on his face streaked with sweat, leaped from the corner of the house. Quint felt himself smiling as he slowly squeezed the trigger, the Apache's shrieking swallowed up in the explosion as the forty-four slug ripped into the Indian's mouth.

Quint didn't wait to see which way the Apache would fall, as he often did when he'd made a kill, but ran toward the horses. Somehow Octavia had gotton MacNamara on his horse, and he wasn't swaying as badly. Quint guessed MacNamara would make it. Octavia was mounted herself, and she tossed his horse's reins to him as he swung into the saddle, raking the horse's flanks even before he was fully settled. Behind them tongues of flame burst from the house's shutters, and deeper in Tubac an alarm bell dismally clanged.

Quint, Octavia and MacNamara had ridden hard for hours, and now with the heat of the day upon them, their skins coated with dust, they slowed their horses to a walk. MacNamara had given Octavia his bandana, and she had wrapped her loose hair under it in a kind of blue cap. She turned toward him, "Carson, what were you doing there this morning? I thought you were up in the hills, prospecting."

MacNamara grinned lazily, "Was, till Apaches run me out. That's how come I showed up at your place. I knew they were on the way."

MacNamara was of black Irish extraction, a drifter from the Georgia hill country through the South, Texas, and now Arizona Territory. He was short and stocky with thick curls of black hair on his forearms, legs, and throat. His eyes were brown, he nose crooked from being broken; today's fight was not the first he had lost.

"By next week, I doubt you'll find a miner left in those hills," Quint said quietly.

"You're right. A lot of them came out with me, but judging from this morning, Tubac won't be a haven long."

"They'll push on to Tucson, just like me, or Mesilla," Octavia commented. "And if the Confederacy doesn't send us troops to

keep the main trails open, we'll all starve together."

"You were damn lucky, all the way around, today, MacNamara," Quint remarked, studying the man, searching for anger, a grudge in the man for the beating he'd taken. It was worth knowing to whom you turned your back, especially if there was more trouble, and he expected it.

MacNamara nodded, "You surprised me as much as I did you, coming around that corner. Only I came out second best. But then, you're Caleb Quint, and this morning was your stock and trade, not mine."

Quint saw MacNamara's eyes were appraising, practical.

They were in sand and shale country, hot, glaring, the forbidding, brown hills looking closer than they were, tumbleweed and stunted brush baked, clumps of grass stringy and grey looking. Some miles ahead there was a clump of thin trunked trees and a shallow creek that during flash flood season turned into a mile wide, shallow river. This was their objective for the evening.

Scanning the horizon near the brown hills, Quint saw it first, then MacNamara. It was a faint cloud of dust, saucer shaped. It seemed to be following the base of the hills on a parallel course with their own, then suddenly it averted, swinging out in the open in their general direction. Disgusted, MacNamara wiped the back of his grimy hand across his eyes, "Those suckers are everywhere."

Octavia had seen the cloud too, "Quint, do you think it's the same Apaches that hit Tubac?"

"Probably. We're not all that far away, and I don't think there were enough of them this morning to take out the whole town. Small raiding party to hit outlying houses like yours, Mrs. Wilkes, just like they've been doing right along, if *cantina* talk can be trusted."

"Outrun them?" MacNamara asked, settling deep into his saddle, pulling his hat down tight, almost even with the tops of his ears.

Quint nodded, "Unless we have to make a stand or can find a place to hole up." He levered his Sharps rifle from the boot, and MacNamara, catching Quint's movement, did the same, cradling his in his right arm.

Then they rode, Octavia's skirts, hiked high above her knees, flying behind her like white and blue balloons. She kept praying that neither Carson's horse nor hers stumbled because she knew Quint would leave behind whoever it was. The only reason he'd come into the house after her this morning was because of his greed. The only reason he'd helped Carson was because he'd been trapped into it by the Apaches. Oh, she'd chosen her man well. She had known it would take someone that tough, that amoral to get her through hostiles and Espejo to Tucson. Certainly, in her travels she'd heard enough about him from her clients and had even seen him in action once in Santa Fe, though Quint didn't remember her. She closed her eyes, as much against the wind, dust, and racing, rising up ground as the memory, but the picture came back anyway.

Caleb Quint had stood in full sunlight across from the hotel where she had been staying, a friend of the moment identifying him to her. He had looked as if he were deciding in which direction to go when the *mestizo* girl brushed him. She was very young, around twelve, not very skillful, her fingers fumbling over Quint's money belt but not releasing it. Realizing her failure, she tried to spin away and run, but Quint's back hand struck her across the face, knocking her into the dusty street. Enraged, he screamed, "You nigger bitch!"

From behind him, a *mestizo* man, middle-aged, potbellied, grabbed Quint. He was yelling too, "Run, Rosa! Run, *nina!*" But the girl could only roll a little way off, too stunned to get to her feet.

Quint turned on the man, "You bastard! Putting your daughter on the streets!" Then he jabbed his fists several, swift times into the soft, belly fat. As the man buckled, Quint grabbed his ears, twisting them until the man was screeching

like a maimed chicken. Letting go, he shoved his knee up under the man's chin, snapping the large, heavy skull backward. Then he let the man fall and walked across the street into the hotel.

Stunned, Octavia had stayed at her window. No one had come to help the child or her father. They had just remained in the dust. Finally, sickened, she had turned back to her friend.

They could all hear the howling now, carried eerily across the open space, sounding hollow, and the skin along Octavia's spine puckered in chills. Riding bunched together, they kept a wary eye on the fast approaching cloud. Quint caught glimpses of piston-like horses' forelegs, lathered chests. He cocked his Sharps, MacNamara doing the same. Then suddenly the cloud veered away, fast fading in the distance ahead of them.

They reined in, their exhausted horses trembling beneath them as they exchanged baffled glances. "They could have had us. Why?" Octavia asked.

MacNamara ventured a thought, "Help coming?"

Quint shook his head, "Doubtful. My guess is they've spotted bigger game than us."

Slowly, they started walking their horses. The sickening odor reached them long before they reached its source, Octavia gagging and holding a scented handkerchief to her nose. She had the uneasy feeling Quint and MacNamara knew its cause. Their faces were grim, wrinkled against the smell. They were silent, and because she was afraid to know, she didn't ask them what the odor was.

They topped a shallow swell of ground and looked down at the debacle. Octavia jerked her horse away, retching. Quint and MacNamara rode down into the smoking camp, halting before the three swinging bodies, tight reining their skittish horses. Three men hung upside down, their heads suspended eighteen inches from smoking fires. "Mother of God," and MacNamara crossed himself. "Had their brains roasted."

"Favorite Apache pastime. So's that one." Quint pointed to the base of a wagon wheel. Two, small, crumpled bodies lay there like rag dolls, their arms and legs unnaturally askew. One

was an infant. The Apaches had swung the children by their heels, smashing their skulls on the axle.

"The kids means there was a woman."

"Probably find her farther along." Quint looked over the two wagons, spotting the stenciling on one of them. "I figure it like this. The emigrants got bogged down here. Lame animal, sickness. The freighters from this Amos Logan Company stopped to help and got caught in the raid."

Wiping his hand over his face, MacNamara started to dismount.

"Forget burying. No time." Quint turned away, heading his horse back up the slope.

MacNamara hesitated, then swung in behind him. "I'd sure like to hook up with a larger party."

Quint twisted around, smiling sardonically. "Who the hell wouldn't if they had the choice. I don't recall that the three of us have one."

They crested the hill, joining Octavia whose back was still turned. Carefully, they skirted the area, riding in silence. A mile or so farther on, MacNamara caught sight of a bit of flowered, skirt calico behind stunted brush. It flapped languidly like a ghost's hand in the small breeze that had sprung up. He looked meaningfully at Quint over Octavia's head. Quint imperceptibly shook his head. Without a break in stride, they had passed it.

They were all tired and hungry now, the animals no better off than themselves. Octavia hung onto the pommel, knowing the only thing keeping her going was fear. Her eyes constantly searched the horizon with the men's. She noticed neither of them had booted their Sharps, and instead of that giving her confidence, it made her more fearful. They were as worried as she. She prayed for darkness, for its hiding.

Setting sun had turned the brown hills red, great black shadows absorbing dust colored sand and heat, when they saw the thin trunked trees. From the creek, harness bells tinkled merrily. "Freighters? My God, freighters!" Octavia was crying.

Quint led the way in past the sentries. There were ten wagons, all with Amos Logan Company stenciled on their sides. He rode up to a middle-aged man, full brown beard, washed out blue eyes, straight and taunt frame.

"Amos Logan?" The freightmaster nodded. "The others aren't coming."

Octavia was fed and rolled up in a blanket in one of the wagons. She'd taken the offered slug of bourbon from one of the freighters, and now she was comfortably hazy. The events of the day were nearly forgotton, for she was an eternal optimist. That was the only way she had survived her grueling teens on a Louisville, Kentucky, pleasure boat.

"Night, 'Tavia," she heard Carson call as he shuffled past and settled in the darkness. By then, she was asleep.

From his position, MacNamara searched out the other sentry posts. Quint, he could see, was slouching. That man was an enigma. He had the reputation of a hardcase, which he had certainly lived up to today. Yet, MacNamara remembered a fire in St. Louis.

It had been one of those rickety, tenement-like hotels, perched on the waterfront, surrounded by cotton bales. MacNamara had been in a cheap bar when the bales went up and sparks ignited the hotel. He had run outside with the rest as the bar's windows flushed crimson.

Caleb Quint, equally curious, stood near a group of black stevedores, watching ragbag guests stream from the hotel, the roof engulfed. It seemed most people were getting out until he looked up at a second story window. He saw a woman frantically waving a pillowcase, one crying child in her arms, another clutching her skirt. The room behind her was filling rapidly with smoke, tongues of flames licking around the doorjam.

Looking around, he spotted, close to the river, an unhitched wagon piled high with cotton bales. It was risky. He started prodding the stevedores, "Come on, you black bastards! Move those bales under that window!" Frightened of the fire, they moved sluggishly until Quint, angry, grabbed up a muleskinner's

whip, crashing its weighted butt across the shoulders of one of them.

Glass, propelled by the heat, burst from the windows, showering around Quint as he climbed the bales. As he reached the top of the pile, the woman threw him the child she had been holding, and then forced the second to jump onto the bales. Quint quickly passed them down to the stevedores, turning back to the woman, yelling, "Now jump!" She did, but as she leaped free of the window casing her hem caught fire, igniting the cotton bale she landed on. Quint yanked her out of the flames, ripping the burning skirt from her body, lowering her to the stevedores. Her legs were burned, blisters glistening in the uncertain light. Quint himself jumped clear just as the wagon burst into flames.

MacNamara, along with the rest then, had run forward, an impromptu bucket brigade springing up from the river. In the aftermath, Quint had disappeared.

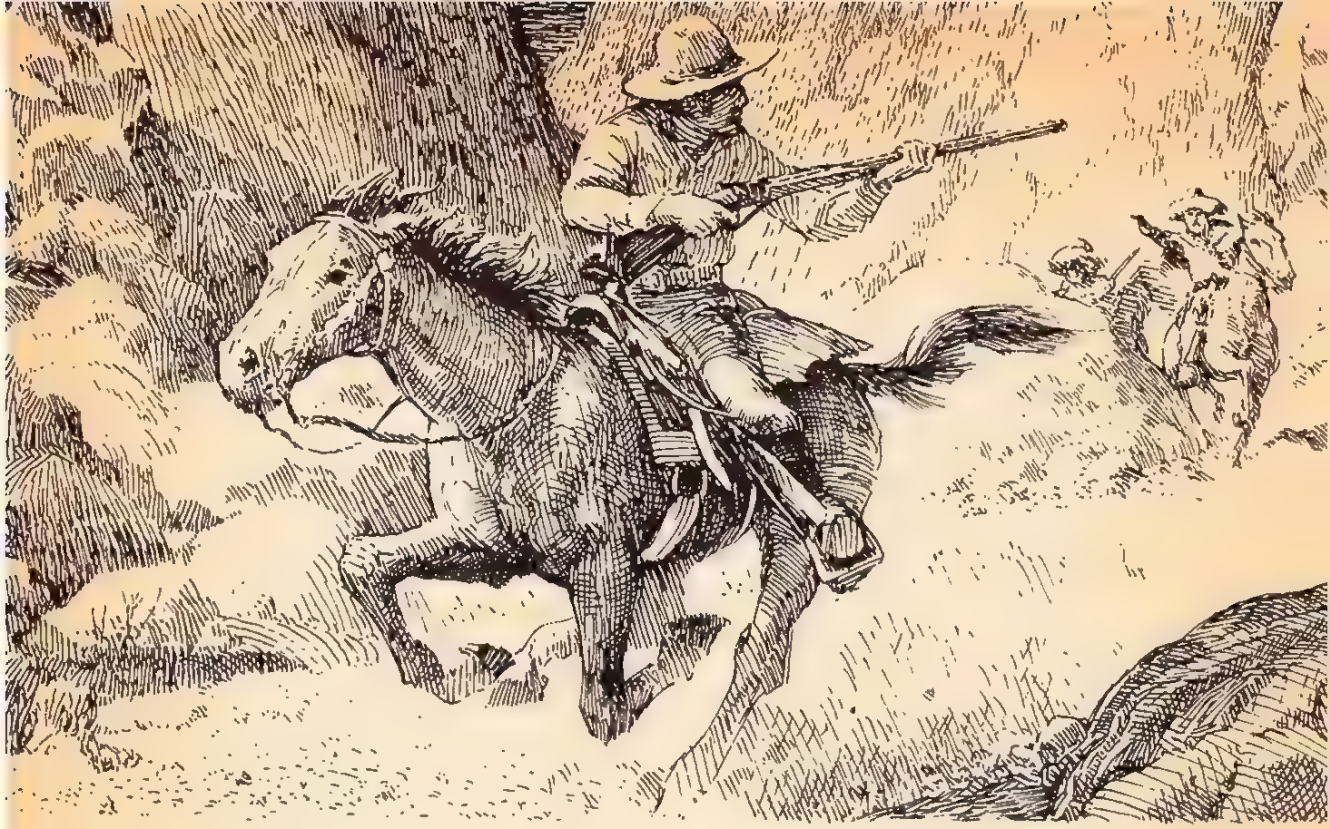
Rumors flew thick after that in St. Louis. Quint had only risked his neck because they had been his wife and children. He was actually a member of the Virginia Quints, but was the black sheep of the family. He had refused to attend the University of Virginia or take the Grand Tour, the pastimes of well-bred, Southern gentlemen. His father had finally kicked him out when Quint had beaten a slave to death. MacNamara didn't know how much to believe. Quint had certainly not displayed a refined, Southern drawl today, but then perhaps he'd been too long in the territories.

MacNamara saw Amos Logan approaching him. Logan was a Mormon and had been freighting in the area for a number of years. This was not the first time they had traveled together.

"See anything of Espejo?" Logan asked.

"No, just Apaches ever since I left the hills. You expecting trouble from him?"

Logan nodded, "I've got cargo he likes. A wagon full of Sharps and shells. Somehow he finds out things like that." He drifted on.



Quint was riding point the next morning when Espejo and his men burst out at him from behind an outcropping of rock. A moment later, and he would have ridden into the trap, but someone had been overanxious. There were fifteen of them plus Espejo, all wearing sombreros and various combinations of serapes, ponchos, and cheap, white peasant skirts. Quint jerked his horse onto a tangent course back toward Logan's wagons, pulling his Sharps. One of the Mexicans was gaining on him, yelling obscenities in Spanish. Quint glanced over and, grinning, fired, watching the dazed expression steal over the boy's face as he looked down at the huge, bubbling, red spot on his belly before he pitched from the saddle, rolling over and over like a discarded doll.

Logan had heard the shot and was circling his wagons as Quint came in sight. MacNamara was riding out to help him, firing rapidly with his Navy Colt. When the two met, Quint whirled his mount back toward Espejo's bunch, he and MacNamara charging down on the bandits. Surprised, they scattered like chickens before the fox while Quint and MacNamara raced back to the freight wagons.

"Where'd they jump you?" Logan asked, reloading his new Henry rifle.

"The outcropping. I figure they camped there last night, waiting. Brushed out their tracks because there weren't any this morning."

"Well, what are our chances?" Octavia asked, her arms akimbo.

Quint was squinting, watching the bandits regroup in open desert.

"We got through yesterday," MacNamara answered flatly.

"Which one is Espejo?" Quint asked.

Logan looked intently at the distance Mexicans, then pointed, "That one. Seen that sucker enough times."

"Is he always successful, Amos?" MacNamara was shading his eyes so he could see the *jefe*.

"No. It's usually running battles. Sometimes he gets a wagon that loses a driver, a team or a wheel. Because he chooses to fight that way makes me think he's got old muzzle loaders and is short on powder."

Quint was studying Espejo. He was a squat, heavy, bandy-

legged Mexican, very dark, his eyes gleaming almonds, his coarse, black hair cut unevenly short. Yet, for all his grotesqueness, there was something fierce and hawk-like about him. Also, true to Logan's guess, Espejo was carrying a muzzle loader.

"All right, my idea is we can save ourselves a lot of trouble if we either kill or unhorse Espejo. Concentrate on him. When he's down, the others will probably take off." Quint looked around him. MacNamara and Logan were nodding. Octavia's eyes had gone a queer yellow-grey.

The order was passed. The bandits broke toward them, shrieking, something between an Apache's canting and a Rebel yell. MacNamara sucked in his breath, "Damn! That's a beautiful sight!"

It was too, Espejo the tip of a fan, his men spread out behind him, their bright colored serapes and ponchos shimmering in the heat.

"Hell," Quint was disgusted. "He's just asking to be picked off."

"Espejo is a flaunter," Octavia whispered. "He doesn't believe his number is up. He says he'll know when it is."

He glanced at her. She definitely looked strange, almost as if she were proud of Espejo.

"Yeah, he'll know. He'll be dead," Quint replied cynically.

Deliberately, he took aim with his Sharps, sitting on Espejo's swarthy head, caressingly squeezing the trigger. Espejo dropped. Quint heard Logan's men cheering. Then he swore. Espejo was getting up, and, shielded by his men, was climbing on behind one of the riders. Five arrows, their feathers flicking in the wind, stuck out at odd angles from Espejo's horse. Espejo with his men swept past Logan's wagons out of rifle range, the omnious dust cloud gaining on them.

Octavia whispered, "You're definitely on Espejo's list now, Quint. You got away from him once and you tried to kill him."

"What makes you such a damn authority, Mrs. Wilkes?" He was shaking her by the shoulders.

Her eyes were bright topaz, and there was a half smile on her face, "Espejo is a legend, Quint. A fearful one." She felt his hands drop away, and she walked toward her horse.

MacNamara was saying, "That makes the second time in two days the Apaches have passed over us."

"Maybe the third time's the charm," Quint remarked.

They finally reached Tucson late the following afternoon. The town was crowded, mostly with refugees. Octavia counted out the silver coins, talking quietly, "Look, Quint. I know you saw where I have my treasure box hidden. Don't be fool enough to think you can cheat me out of it. I'll leave you dead in Tubac before that happens." Then she was gone, walking down the street toward a hotel. The last Quint saw of her was her blue capped head disappearing into the shadowy entrance.

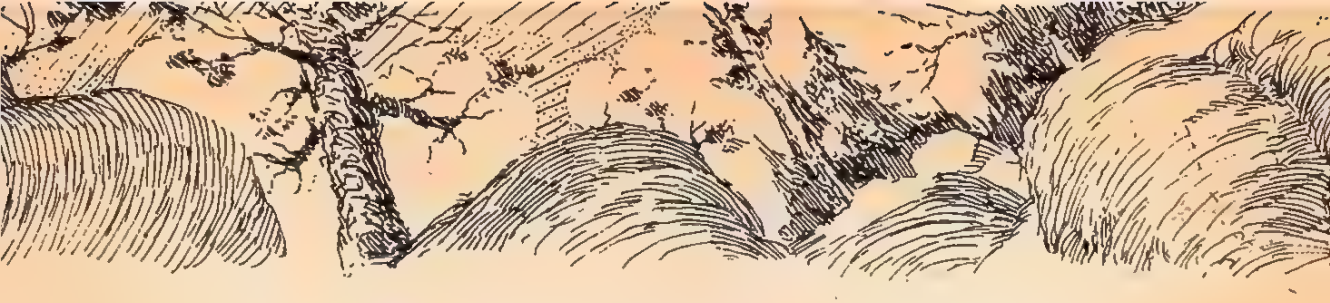
Below Quint and thirty miles away Tubac was a ghost town. The Anza Trail to it was cut and sealed off by the Apaches, and that was why he hadn't gone for Octavia Wilkes' cache.

He scanned the jumbled rocks and stunted pines, looking for stragglers. Prospectors were still coming out, heading directly for Tucson and Mesilla. Prospectors were a funny bunch, different from the mines' hired men; the big mines like the Heintzelman had been closed for months. But prospectors hung on to the bitter end, their greed pushing them to make one more try for a strike before leaving. Well, Quint had learned a long time ago that the easiest way to get something he wanted was to take it away from someone who already had it.

He saw the man's tattered, black hat moving above a rocky lip like a bug. Listening carefully, he heard the hooves of two animals striking the rocky trail. The man had a pack animal. Smiling, Quint eased his mount into a parallel course.

The trail he followed climbed higher into the hills and was sheltered at intervals by large boulders and pines. Below him, he watched his quarry also twisting and climbing toward the crest. There was a spot ahead, just over the top, where Quint, without exposing himself, planned a clear, downward shot at close range.

Then the Apache jumped him. He landed, howling, on the horse's rump. The startled animals's bucking and churning knocked both men to the gritty ground, sun sparkling on the Indian's steel blade as it ripped through Quint's shirt. Out of the corner of Quint's eye, as he parried the thrust, he saw the prospector take off at a gallop. Disgusted, he smashed his knee into the Apache's nose, cartilage crunching, blood spurting over both of them. Snarling, the Indian tried to hold Quint immobile with his sheer body weight while he again brought up his knife. Quint got his fingers hooked around his forty-four, jerking it out of the holster, firing as he tried to turn the barrel toward the Indian's side.



His shot was off, creasing the Apache's painted, greasy back in a long, red welt. The knife came down simultaneously, missing its mark, as, involuntarily, the Indian jerked in response to the bullet's burning. The blade struck a rock, snapping into fragments, as Quint heaved aside with the partial release of weight. With the gun barrel, he slugged repeatedly at the man's ribs, the Apache screaming and rolling onto his haunches as one rib splintered. Quint pulled the trigger. The Apache lay very still. Then Quint picked up the inert body and threw it down onto the lower trail.

He listened to the deep silence. Apparently, the Apache was alone, a scout or left as a guard. In either case, Quint decided to proceed with more than his usual caution.

He rode slowly up the trail, frequently glancing below him for the prospector. After topping the crest, he slipped into the place he had picked for his ambush. There was a table rock screened by some starter pines. Tethering his horse, he slid onto the rock and looked down. Someone else had had the same idea. Below him lay the prospector, surrounded by a loose jumble of rocks, his horse and pack animal gone.

Quint went down for a closer look. The man had been killed by the rock slide, his head badly battered. Caught on one of the boulders was a scrap of brightly colored wool, a piece of a serape. Quint frowned. It meant Espejo was in the area.

Squatting over the body, Quint began going through the man's pockets. He pulled out a collection of silver buttons, gold jewlery, including a wedding ring, porcelain picture frames, squares of fine lace, and a little, cloth pouch. When Quint opened the pouch, he found gold teeth. Slowly, a smile spread over his face. This man had been a scavenger, just like him, even robbing the dead of their teeth.

Straightening up, Quint looked speculatively at the trail ahead of him. Espejo or his men must have been in a hurry to ignore the man's pockets. Where was Espejo, what was he up to, and what part had the Apache he had just killed played in it?

Quint stuffed the booty inside his shirt and climbed back up to the high trail. In a moment, he was on his way again, his general destination Tucson.

Quint stumbled upon Espejo's camp by accident. Only the dusk and the roughness of the terrain above it saved him from being spotted by the sentry. The camp seemed fairly permanent, two or three mud and thatched shacks stuck to the hillside.

Now he understood what the Apache had been doing on the trail. Espejo was holding a meeting with a band of them. His legs spread wide aprt, his hands on his hips, he waggled his head at a blanket spread open before him with every guttural word he spoke. Quint looked closely at the merchandise. Muzzle loaders, the model usually used by the *Federales,* and powder horns. He guessed the Apaches had jumped a patrol a few miles over the border, but what was Espejo trading for the artillery?

Suddenly the Indian Espejo had been dealing with swept up his arm in agreement. The other Apaches, horsed silhouettes in the greyness, began canting, the chant echoing up reedy and lifeless to Quint.

Torches flared on around the camp, and Quint watched a Mexican walk to one of the shacks. He threw open the door, stuck the torch inside, and yelled an order. Slowly, the women emerged, three Mexicans and a white woman by the looks of her blonde hair. Two of them clung together, crying. The other two were stupified, their legs moving of their own accord. Espejo's men herded them up to the bunched Apaches where they were scooped up and thrown across saddles, the weeping ones, when they struggled, cracked on the heads.

"So that's how," Quint thought, "Espejo's paying for his guns. Selling women across the border." He shifted his position

uncomfortably, then turned his mount away, backtracking. It was none of his affair.

His horse's hoof struck a loose pebble, causing a rattling rock and sand slide. Instinctively, he crouched low, but not soon enough. The rifle shot cracked out, the bullet singeing his neck, warm ooze running into his shirt. He kicked his horse into a breakneck pace, riding blindly in the falling darkness. Behind him he heard a babble of Spanish and Apache, then the rush of horses and shrill whistling. Then he heard only Spanish, the other sounds subsiding, and after a little, nothing at all. He reined in. No one was following. He swabbed his bandana over the wound. Rather than bother with him, the Apaches had been more concerned about getting over the border and Espejo with getting rid of them.

Nevertheless, Quint traveled through the night. In the early morning before dawn, ground fog hovering around the thin trunked trees and shallow creek, he came across Amos Logan. Logan, even with the territorial unrest, had not stopped his freighting trips. He had just hired more outriders like Carson MacNamara.

Quint took the coffee MacNamara offered him. "What's new in Tucson?"

"Captain Sherod Hunter," MacNamara replied with pride.

"Who's he?"

Logan broke in with a small, sarcastic laugh, "Head of the Texas Confederate Calvalry. Sent to settle this territory."

"How are conditions in Tucson?"

Ruefully, MacNamara admitted, "Everyone's hungry. Octavia was right about what she said about the trails. But now with Hunter here, things'll be better."

"We've been about the only ones getting through," Logan added, "between Espejo and the Apaches."

Swiftly then, Quint filled them in on what he had seen the previous night. Although for the rest of the trip they expected an attack, none came. Quint guessed Espejo had also crossed the border.

Quint was leaning against the counter in Levine's store, the booty he'd taken from the dead prospector spread out in front of him, when the calvalry rode past accompanied by loud cheers. He moved to the doorway, watching the procession pass: wagons, stacked high with flour sacks, Texans in butternut uniforms, loose and rangy in the saddle, and the blue splash of Union troopers, disarmed and riding at the rear. From behind him, Levine said, "That's Hunter and his bunch. Looks like he made good his promise."

"What was that?" Before Quint turned away, he saw Octavia Wilkes across the street, cheering with the rest, and Bonnie Blue Flag pinned to her breast.

"He said he'd feed Tucson and his men. His plan was to ride into Pima country and confiscate that flour meant for Fort Yuma. I'm told there's 1500 sacks there. Looks like he didn't have too much trouble with that Union squad either."

"The whole business was common knowledge here? How'd he get away with it?"

"Come on, Quint," Levine sounded disgusted. "First, most everyone here is hungry. Second, you know most people here are from the South. They're not going to rat to the Yanks."

"Where will Hunter store the flour?" Quint asked speculatively.

"In the armory. Ration it out."

Sudden interest sprang into Quint's eyes, the flour forgotten, "A fully stocked armory?"

"Small arms, a couple of light cannons."

Quint saw Levine was following his drift. He studied the man opposite him, seeing a short, soft fleshed, bald man with small, bright blue eyes. There was a half smile on his lips.

Quint had always known Levine was a little bit crooked. He'd been selling him scavenged goods since the beginning. Now he was seeing new depths, something Logan had said about Espejo sticking in his mind.

"You can contact Espejo, can't you, Levine?"

The merchant gestured with upturned palms, "It can be done. What is it you want me to tell him?"

"Rifles and ammunition for gold. Trading with me is less risky than with Apaches."

"Where will you get your merchandise, Quint?"

"The armory. Your cut, Levine, is twenty-five percent." Then he added, "Hunter and a full complement will be riding out soon. Fort Yuma isn't going to let them get away with that flour."

Levine's half smile widened. "I'll arrange it, Quint."

Captain Sherod Hunter and his men rode out in the afternoon, leaving little better than a squad to guard the armory on rotating watches. Now, flattened against the warehouse wall, Quint listened to Tucson's night sounds: a dog howling, someone stumbling over a box in a back alley, a bottle shattering, a woman's shrill voice shouting obscenities, the soft wafting of Spanish in the distance. Closer by, he heard the clink of spurs and the rattle of a carbine knocked against a wall, the Texan in butternut stepping out into the moonlight. Swiftly, Quint stepped up behind him, bringing his gun barrel down on the man's head. The Texan toppled forward with a soft thump. Quint grabbed his heels and dragged him back against the wall, knotting lengths of rope around his hands and ankles, stuffing the man's bandana into his mouth. That took care of the last member of the watch.

He stepped around to the side door, knocking off the padlock with the butt of his forty-four. From up the alley, a wagon creaked forward, and then Levine was sliding off the wagon box with a kerosene light. They crept inside, Levine lighting the lamp, setting it on a keg labeled salt. Against the back wall they saw stacked, long boxes with the word carbines stenciled on their sides. Together, each taking an end, they loaded four cases into the wagon. Then they went back for the ammunition. Twenty minutes after Quint had knocked out the laxt Texan, he was ready to leave Tucson.

Levine, his round face flushed and sweaty, looked up at

Quint on the wagon box, "*Bon chance.* Espejo's a mean one."

"After this, I'll leave the territory for awhile. At least, until Hunter goes back to Texas."

"Why do you think he'll go?"

"He'll be called back. He'll be needed in the East." Quint sounded bitter. "Hell, Levine, the South can't win this war in the long run. Not with drinking degrees from the University of Virginia and Grand Tours."

Then Quint eased off the brake, turned the wagon into the street, and slowly drove out of Tucson. Once in the shadows he thought he saw Octavia Wilkes and Carson MacNamara, but it could have been any man and woman getting in late.

The meeting place was at the shallow creek with its clump of thin trunked trees halfway between Tucson and Tubac. Espejo was already there when Quint arrived, his men a multicolored fan behind him. Quint saw a look of recognition flicker through Espejo's glittering, almond eyes.

"Senor, your gold." Espejo snapped his fingers, and a bandit rode forward with an old, battered, U.S. Mail pouch, the coins inside jingling.

Quint never took his eyes off Espejo as his fingers snaked out and grasped the heavy pouch. He saw the faint smile play over Espejo's thick lips, the slight rotation of his hips, and the tightening of his knees against his horse's flanks as his fist jumped toward his gun. As the barrel cleared the holster, Quint swung the pouch hard, knocking the gun against a tree trunk. Speedily, surprising the bandits, Quint sprang to the ground, slugged Espejo in the face with the money bag, stunning him, and swung up behind him, kicking the horse into a run.

Espejo started struggling. Quint jerked out his forty-four, jammed the muzzle into Espejo's back and pulled the trigger, sending a ball smashing through Espejo's spinal cord, the lifeless body falling off the horse.

Seeing their leader tumbling in the dust like a halved puppet electrified the bandits. They came howling after Quint.

Clutching the money pouch to his chest, Quint crouched low

over the horse's neck. Bullets pinged around him, nipping at his heels like angry bees. He realized he was being herded toward the hills, the fanned out bandits cutting the trail to Tucson. Then he saw why. Spewing out of a draw toward him was a large, Apache raiding party. He jerked his horse away from the hills even though it brought him closer to Espejo's men, straightening up to clip off a couple of quick shots. He watched a horse buckle and its rider somersault into the path of the other riders. Another bandit doubled over, but kept his saddle. Yet, Quint could not break their line and strike the Tucson trail. Despite them, he forced his way between his two foes onto the road to Tubac.

The drumming pursuit disappeared. He twisted around and saw the hills swallowing up the Apaches. As for Espejo's men, they had turned back to collect the wagon of arms. For now, he was safe, and as long as he was headed towards Tubac, he might as well claim Octavia Wilkes' cache before leaving the territory.

In the late afternoon, Quint rode through Octavia's orchard, the sunlight slanting eerily off the splintered and hacked pomegranate and peach trees. It was unearthly still. He came to the house. The walls were scorched, the heavy shutters burned out, and the roof had fallen in. All that was intact about the property was the low, pink, adobe wall. Quint half smiled, remembering a few, short months ago Octavia and her proposition. He had to give the woman credit. She had guts, and she had never whimpered during the journey to Tucson.

He tethered his horse at the edge of the orchard and went into the house, slipping and sliding over loose rubble. In the parlor, the heavy beams had fallen into the room at crazy angles, one resting in the hearth bed. Ducking under some, crawling over others, Quint reached the hearth and studied his problem. The offending beam was too heavy and cumbersome for him to swing it out of the way. Moreover, he did not have much maneuvering space. His eyes hunted for a pole he could use as a lever and found the iron curtain rod. He hauled it over

to the hearth, got it wedged under the beam, and leaned on it with his entire body weight. At first, the beam didn't budge. Then there was a groan, and the beam skidded a few inches toward the room.

The hearth bed was clear, and Quint dropped to his knees, prying up the stones with his knife. The dying sunlight struck off the metal box, dazzling his eyes, as he swung it free of its hole.

"Damn you, Quint! I warned you. Now stand up."

Quint did as he was told, turning around to face Octavia Wilkes. Her eyes were hard, narrow pieces of topaz. Beside her stood Carson MacNamara, leveling his Navy colt just above Quint's belt buckle.

As Octavia opened her mouth to speak again, there was a zipping sound. She gave a strangled cry, more like a whistle, and a froth of blood spurted from her throat over the arrow's feathered tip. MacNamara took a lance in the chest while Quint, dodging behind a beam, whipped out his forty-four and snapped a shot off through the window. He saw an Apache tumble backward.

Silence settled over the house, although Quint knew the Apaches were still outside. When the light failed, he crept over to Octavia, confirmed she was dead, then went on to MacNamara. MacNamara's eyelids flickered open, his voice soft and hoarse, "Tough luck about 'Tavia. You were right, Quint. Third time was the charm."

Then the sing-song canting started, continuing throughout the night. Campfires ringed the house. In the early morning hours, Quint heard a commotion, and, creeping to the window, saw many Apaches spurring out of Tubac. He turned to tell MacNamara and discovered he had died.

At dawn, Quint was ready for whoever remained. He was barricaded behind a beam, both MacNamara's gun and his own brace of forty-fours loaded. He heard guttural, Apache whispering and a scrabbling sound. Looking up, he saw a dark, red and green blotched face top the wall at the roofline and search

the debris. The Apache, spotting Octavia's and MacNamara's bodies, gave a shrill yell. Another face appeared beside the first.

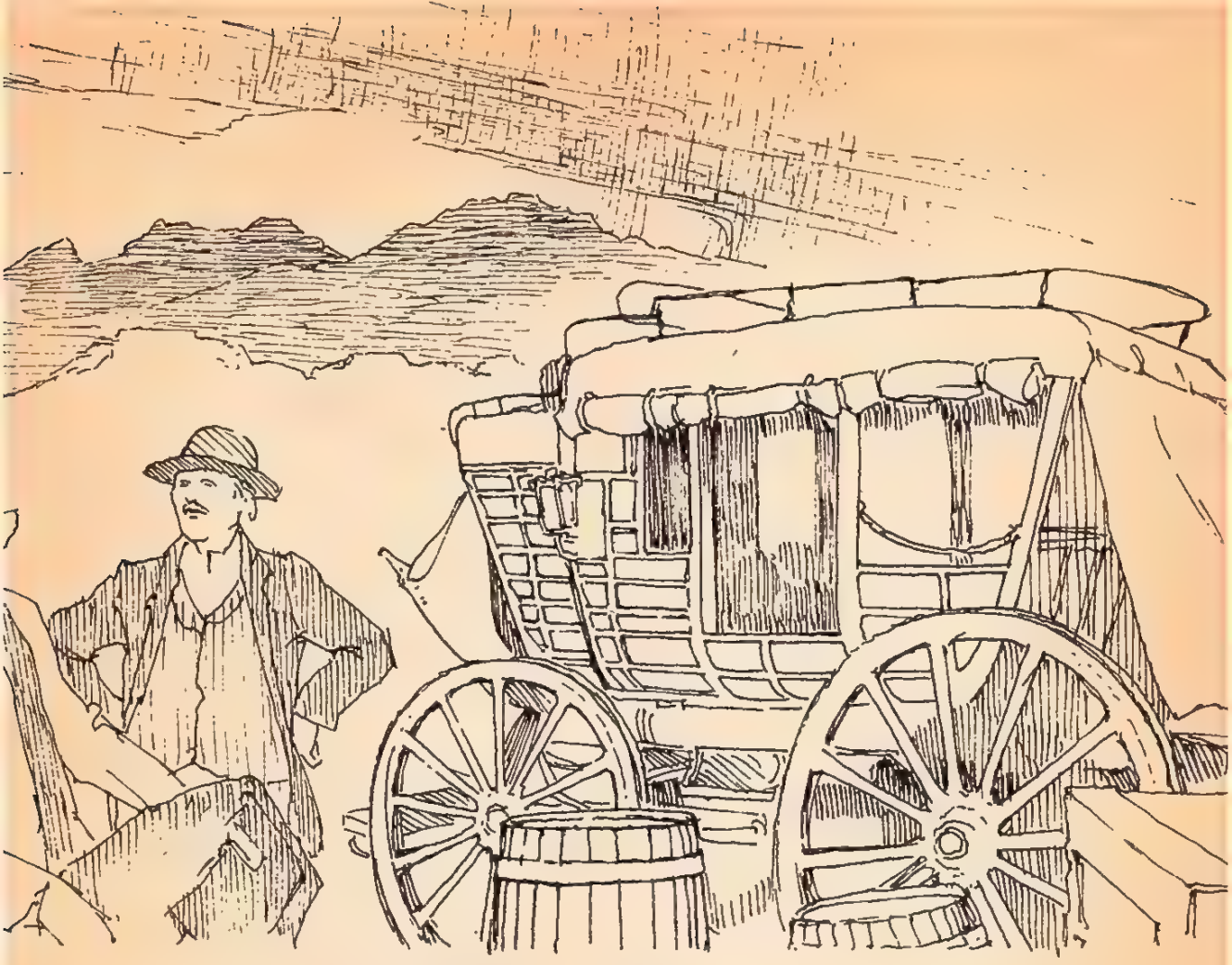
The Apache who had yelled started slithering over the wall. Quint aimed at the back of his head and squeezed the trigger, watching the bullet's force slam the Indian's body into the wall before he dropped into the wrecked parlor. The second Apache immediately slipped from sight.

Quint, who knew his enemy would not try the roof again, searched out the windows and the rubble covered, tile hallway. A sickening odor seeped in through one window, a mixture of rancid, animal fat and sweet, crushed wisteria. Smiling, Quint leveled both guns at the opening. Then he heard a crash in the hallway and swiveled his guns in that direction just as the shrieking Apache vaulted through the window. Caught off balance, Quint fired with one weapon at the Indian, tagging his shoulder, and had to fire a second time point-blank into his chest. The Apache pitched forward on top of him. He felt his shirt, wet and warm with the Indian's blood, sticking to his belly, but he did not move. He cocked one gun and rested the barrel, pointed toward the hallway, on the Apache's shoulder. No one came.

Quint laughed out loud. It sounded eerie in the deathly stillness of Octavia Wilkes' house and Tubac. He shoved the Apache away from him and hauled Octavia's metal box toward him. A gun still in each hand, he opened the lid, stared, and then laughed again, kicking the box away. Holstering one of the forty-fours, he stood up. He looked over at MacNamara and Octavia, watching the red ants crawl over Octavia's topaz eyes and blue capped head.

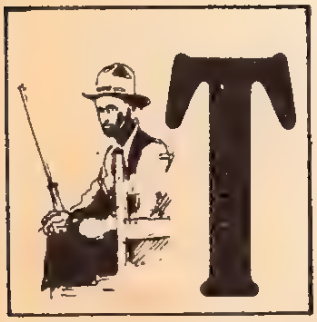
"Damn. You poor, stupid bastards," Quint said quietly.

Caleb Quint walked outside, and he heard distant rifle fire. Who was fighting the Apache now—Espejo's men, Amos Logan? "Well, hell," he muttered, found his horse, and mounted. Kicking the animal into motion, he pulled his hat down against the quickening wind, the Tubac *boletas* and the Confederate bonds blowing out of the metal box in the house behind him.



STAGECOACH TO OBLIVION

By Wanda Matten



Thomas! Stop squirming and sit up straight! You must remember that you are eight years old now, and act like a little man." The jouncing and rocking of the stagecoach had given her a pounding headache. "And it certainly hasn't helped my disposition either," thought Louise Latimer. "It isn't his fault we're taking this interminable journey."

"He isn't disturbing me, ma'am. I remember when I was his age. Couldn't sit still either."

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"Here, son! Why don't you trade places with me, so you can sit by the window and look out. You might even see more buffalo or Indians!"

"That's very kind of you, sir. Say 'thank-you' to the nice man, Thomas."

Louise vainly brushed the dust from her good lansdowne skirt and dabbed at her cheeks and brow with her handkerchief. She frowned at it, trying to remember when the lace had last been snowy white. She turned her gaze to the lanky, sad-eyed stranger who had given up his seat.

"I wish you hadn't said, Indians, sir! I'm deathly afraid of Indians! Why two nights ago, our dinner was served by a squaw. Imagine that! I nearly fainted when I was told that she had actually cooked our supper. However, it looked good, and tasted delicious. I even enjoyed it, once I overcame my early repugnance."

Mrs. Latimer held the handkerchief up to her mouth, as if to seine out the dust, and then hastily withdrew it as she realized again how soiled it was. She crumpled it up in her hand and fanned the air, which only quickened the dust and sent it roiling about her head.

"Does it ever rain in this part of the country?"

"Yes, ma'am. About once every ten years. And when it does, you wouldn't want to be here. Those hills can't hold all the moisture and it comes down the arroyos in great rivers of water. We'd be bobbing around out here like Noah in his Ark."

"Well, at least we'd be clean, Mr.— Mr.?—"

"I beg your pardon, ma'am. My name is Samuel Lionel Talbotson. At your service."

"I'm very pleased to meet you, I'm sure. Are you going as far as San Francisco, Mr. Talbotson? We seem to have come a vast distance, and I know so little about geography. I tried to study my late husband's maps before we left Philadelphia, but they really do not tell you how far . . . far is . . . do they? All those squiggly little lines, and towns I never heard of. When he died six months ago, it never would have occurred to me to

undertake so long a journey with only Thomas Jr. as protection. Yet my sister pleaded loneliness and begged me come out to visit her. We've been traveling for weeks, with little rest. My sister, Mrs. James Branigan—oh, forgive me—I am Mrs. Thomas E. Latimer, and that is my son, Thomas Jr. He's very large for his age. Don't you agree? He misses his father very much, and is becoming a little difficult for me to handle. I have hopes that perhaps my brother-in-law will apply a firm hand. Can you tell me how much farther it is to San Francisco, Mr. Talbotson?"

"Yes, ma'am. We should be there in a week or ten days. A week if we can take the cut-off over the summit. Ten days, if we have to take the old Colby toll road."

"Did you say, Colby, Mr. Talbotson? But that's exactly the way I want to go. My sister wrote me that Colby House was the one bright spot of her whole journey. She says that Colby House is run by an enchanting gentleman—a Frenchman, with impeccable manners. Why, there is actually a dining room with linen and real silver on the table. I was looking forward to staying at Colby House. Why ever would we want to go the other way?"

"It's the quickest way, Mrs. Latimer. If we can get through the pass on the new summit route, it will shorten our journey by three days. The Colby toll road follows the canyons along the river at a lower elevation and hasn't been used much since the placer miners swept through some years ago. The road is often blocked by mud and boulders. I've heard them say it can take as long as a week to get through the toll road past Colby stage stop. It's a hazardous, tortuous route, only used as an alternate when the pass is closed. It's a cruel trip. Hard on horses and men, let alone a delicate lady of your stature."

"But, my dear Mr. Talbotson, surely if my sister could make the journey unscathed, I can. I'm every bit as strong as she."

There was a muffled grunt from the corner—a great snore cut off by phlegm, and a spasm of coughing. A bearded man sat up with a start, rubbing both eyes with knuckled fists. He stared out the window while he checked his wallet pocket and then his

flask pocket, as though each had equal importance. He surreptitiously brought the flask to his lips, took a good long pull, and asked.

"Where are we, Mister? Have we passed Haystack Peak yet?"

His voice asked the question of Sam Talbotson, but his eyes sought other answers. Louise watched him as he surveyed his fellow passengers. He was knee to knee with the plump lady with the ample hips on her left. Since there was no ring on her finger, Louise had taken her for a spinster. His eyes dismissed her, swept past Louise, and studied the young man in the other corner. Ben Whitmore, he had said when asked his name. A young man, hardly whiskered. The bearded man winked at Thomas Jr. and then turned to gaze at Sam Talbotson.

"Well, Mister? Have we passed the Haystack?"

"Yes. During the night. Did you plan to get off there?"

"Oh, no! Just a landmark. Just a place to pass by, so's you know how far you've come. Know what I mean? A place to pass by. My name is Buff Kramer. Pleased to meet you all." The spinster barely bent her lip, and returned her gaze to the window. The young man with the downy chin nodded in acknowledgement, and seemed to doze. Mrs. Latimer coughed softly, and again waved her hand before her face.

"Would you like a drink from my flask, ma'am? It surely helps thin out the dust."

Louise hastily shook her head.

"No! Thank you kindly, Mr. Kramer. I'm quite alright. It's just that the dust tickles my throat occasionally."

"We'll be stopping soon, won't we, Mr. Talbotson? Perhaps we'll get water. Some nice cool well water would taste delicious, wouldn't it?"

"We'll be pulling up at Hornet's Crossing soon. Can you see the mountains up ahead?"

"Oh, yes. I've been watching them for some time. We are traveling straight toward them, and yet they never seem to get any closer."

Mr. Talbotson leaned across Thomas Jr., and peered ahead.

"How do you like the scenery, son? Seen any buffalo yet?"

"Humph!" snorted Buff Kramer. "He ain't likely to see any humps this far west. They say there's still a hundred million of 'em out on the dry plains—but the railroad has hired a young fella named Cody, who says he's gonna shoot ninety-nine million of 'em to feed the construction crews. He's welcome to it! I used to hunt buffalo for the army. Thought I'd never wash the smell off!"

"My sister writes that they serve wild pig at Colby House. She describes it as the most delicious food she had ever eaten. Have you ever hunted wild pig, Mr. Kramer?"

"Can't say as I have. Heard tell of 'em down in the bayous—Louisiana way. Wild pig, you say! Probably some up in those canyons."

"I know you all prefer the shorter route over the summit, but I must say, I really wouldn't mind taking the other road for a meal like that."

"Do they put an apple in his mouth?" asked Thomas Jr.

"An apple in whose mouth, dear?"

"An apple in the pig's mouth—like in my picture book. I want an apple in his mouth."

"Well, we shall see, dear—we shall see. There seems to be a building up ahead, Mr. Talbotson. Would that be Hornet's Crossing?"

"More than likely, ma'am. We've made good time this part of the trip."

"Have you made this trip before, sir?"

"I used to live in California, ma'am. I went East in answer to President Lincoln's call for volunteers in '61. And, since I survived that bloody war between brothers I have decided to take my nightmares home."

"You don't mean that you actually had to kill a brother in the line of duty?"

"They were all my brothers, Mrs. Latimer. I'll see their faces for the rest of my life."

"Then I pity you, sir."

"What's at Hornet's Crossing?" asked Buff.

"It's an intersection, where several roads come together. We'll get a fresh team, and information about the weather ahead. It's unpredictable this late in the year. We'll soon know, won't we."

As the weary team pulled to a stop at the way station, Louise gave a great sigh of relief and followed the stocky little spinster as they were handed down by their driver. She vigorously shook out her skirt, and used the grimy handkerchief to brush the dust from her bodice and sleeves. Mr. Talbotson took her elbow, and led her toward the station where the passengers were to have their first meal of the day. Two roughly clad men began to unhitch the horses, while to one side sat a squatty low-slung canvas-covered coach. Louise compared its plain appearance with the rich hand-painted paneling of the Concord, as a large scarecrow of a man beckoned them from the doorway of the stage stop.

"Howdy, folks," he exclaimed. "Welcome ladies. Food's on the table, what there is. Eat hearty! It's a long way to Colby Station."

"The pass is closed then, is it?" asked Sam Talbotson.

"Oh, yes—yes—snowed last night, and still comin' down. 'Catch Herby' here barely made it through with the mail. We're gonna have to switch you over to the mud-wagon there. Travels better in the canyon. Even so, it's gonna be rough on the ladies." Louise looked at the silent spinster from the corner of her eye, and shrugged. "Her stoic expression never changes," she thought. "She doesn't look at us. She doesn't speak to us. She doesn't even acknowledge our presence. She'll make it! Nothing would dare happen to her!"

The meal was horrendous. Bits of purple meat, floating in globs of congealed gravy. Louise picked up a slice of coarse gray bread, and broke off a small piece only to find she simply could not place it in her mouth. She felt a wave of nausea, left the

table, and hurried to the well outside. The bucket splashed as it hit the water down below and then sank. Louise cranked the handle of the windlass and pulled the bucket up, grateful that the water looked good. Clear and cold. She drank thirstily, then plunged both hands in, swooped the water up to her face, and gasped with delight as the dust washed away. She then took that frightful handkerchief and sloshed it up and down in the bucket, squeezed the dirt from it out onto the ground, and vigorously scrubbed her neck and ears and up into her hairline, relishing the tingle it gave her skin.

"Perhaps they'll have a bath at Colby House. I'm so glad we are going to have to take the long way around in this case. It will be worth the hazards just to have one night in a clean bed after a fine meal. I know sister will be pleased."

The appearance of the only other female passenger at her side, interrupted her ablutions.

"Mrs. Latimer? I beg your pardon. My name is Edwina Bayles. Would you . . . I wonder if you would walk with me to the comfort station out back?" Her round face was pink from embarrassment, and beaded with perspiration. "Please. If you would be so kind. I dislike going back there alone. It's so wide open out there. At home we had roses and lilacs growing along the path and one could be discreet. But here . . . there is just no way to disguise your destination."

Louise smiled and took her arm.

"Why certainly, Miss Bayles. We will walk the barren primroseless path together. I will stand guard, and then you can do the same for me. I understand the road ahead may become very difficult, and we ladies must stick together."

As they came around the corner of the old weathered station, they found the seemingly incongruous mud-wagon had been out fitted with a fresh team, their luggage strapped on the back in the boot. Louise, still feeling friendly toward Miss Bayles, was chattering.

"Why, Edwina, I simply will not tolerate a speck of dust in my home in Philadelphia. Yet, here we are, engulfed in it for

days on end. I am so looking forward to our stay at Colby House, which my sister writes is the only really civilized stop on the whole journey. The French cuisine is as fine as any you would find in 'Paree', my dear. Can you imagine sitting down to dinner with snowy linen on a table set with crystal and silver? The very thought of it will sustain me through the next several hours."

Cyrus Barter, an imposing man, looked too big in the driver's seat of the little canvas-covered coach.

"Everybody up."

Thomas Jr. had been all around the horses, had named every one, and been named in return by the hired hands. Mr. Talbotson gave the ladies a hand up, as Louise asked.

"And where will this contraption take us pray, Mr. Talbotson?"

"We'll continue on the original old Chorpenning route, Mrs. Latimer, and you'll be glad we're in this contraption, as you call it. The mud-wagon has a low center of gravity especially useful on treacherous mountain roads."

Indeed, the motion of the little coach was easy as it rocked on its great leather thorough-braces. They continued along the dusty rutted road for some miles, and then began to climb.

Their first hint of trouble was the clattering of small stones as they hit against the metal rims of the wheels. The coach began to slow, and rock from side to side—front to back—as each groaning axle took the weight from one, to the other. The rocks seemed to get larger, and Louise realized they were traveling on a dry riverbed. With some trepidation she tapped Mr. Talbotson on the shoulder, and he turned his head to look at her.

"If we are in the bottom of a canyon, won't there be danger of flash flood, such as you described earlier?"

"Such a thing is possible, of course, Mrs. Latimer. But not likely. There is no sign of rain at the moment, and the station master told me that we will leave the riverbed and climb above it to a road, such as it is. The danger now is that we might

break a wheel or axle; in which case we would be in quite a predicament."

The metallic clang of wheel rim against stone, as they passed over and through rocks, continued—although their forward progress had slowed to a walk. Louise could clearly hear the wheezing and snorting of the over-burdened team as they pulled against the traces, their hooves hitting, then sliding, as they fought to find footing in the loose cobblestones. It was difficult to hold one's seat inside, and the six passengers found themselves uncomfortably close at times.

Miss Bayles clung to her window strap with fierce determination. But Louise, in the middle, was buffeted between the soft roundness of Miss Bayles on her left and the sharp boniness of the young man on her right. However the worst indignity was being flung sharply back so hard that her feet actually left the floor in an unladylike posture. Up front, their driver urged the horses on, in language quite unsuitable in mixed company, but to no avail. There came a blessed halt inside the swaying vehicle, as the horses came to a complete standstill.

"Everybody down," shouted the driver.

As the motion ceased, Mr. Kramer used it to his advantage to take a long pull from his flask. Mr. Talbotson surveyed the scene with the driver, then softly bade the ladies step down.

Louise hugged herself as she stepped out into the chill wind which swept down the canyon. Thomas Jr. ran up the bank behind some bushes. The ladies exchanged glances, and retreated behind a bend downstream.

When they returned, they found that the men were leading the horses, pulling their bridles and using the whip generously. Louise stumbled after the rotund figure of Miss Bayles across the clattering stones, while Thomas Jr. spent his youthful strength pushing on the back of the coach. They were able to proceed several hundred yards, and then found the road that climbed out of the riverbed and wound up along the canyon wall.

They thankfully re-entered the mud-wagon and rode in com-

parative comfort for several miles with only occasional stops to move fallen logs. A cold rain had started to fall, and their progress with further hindered by mud. The footing was treacherous, and the slightest protrusion on the road set the wheels slipping and slithering.

Mr. Talbotson had closed the storm curtains against the rain, but the wind whistled through, and Miss Bayles deigned to pull her cloak up around her face, yet seemed otherwise unperturbed.

They could hear thunder echoing through the canyon, while the lightning danced across the tree tops with loud crackling arrows of brightness. Now and then they heard the crashing and snapping of branches stripping from falling pines. Louise clung to the thought of Colby House—of warm fires—and hot tea.

At one point they had to stop and unhitch the lead horse so that he could be used to pull a great tree trunk away from the road. The men were soaked to the skin, with teeth chattering, when they returned to their seats, and Mr. Kramer generously passed his flask, with apologies to the ladies.

It had grown dark. The men took turns walking ahead of the horses with a lantern. Progress was agonizingly slow, and Louise began to believe their journey would never end, when a shout up ahead proclaimed lights looming out of the darkness. Colby House seemed ablaze with lamp-light and the welcome smell of woodsmoke tickled her nose.

Their host was gleefully descending the steps as they came to a stop.

"*Bonsoir!* Welcome to Colby House. I am Monsieur Maurice Courtelin. Come in! Come in! Ladies? How delightful to see you! How exhausted you must be! Such a storm! We have two other guests who have been detained by it. Hurry! Hurry! You will soon be warm and dry. It is my great pleasure to serve you."

Monsieur Courtelin danced back and forth on dainty little feet between Mrs. Latimer and Miss Bayles, clucking and 'tsk-tsking' at their condition, trying to hold an umbrella over one—

and then the other—in his agitation to serve them both as he hurried them toward the door.

Louise caught her breath with delight as she viewed the interior of the hostel. Soft lamplight shone on gleaming wood.

"Not a speck of dust that I can see!"

Polished floors reflected the warmth of the flickering flames burning cheerfully in the fireplace. A delicious aroma of hot soup wafted in from the kitchen and she realized she was ravenous. She found her legs suddenly weak, and sank to the plump soft cushion of the sofa before the fire, but their host would have none of that.

"Come! Come! Ladies. A hot bath—a change of clothes—and *ma foi*—a new outlook on life!" He introduced the young man with their luggage as his son, Jacques, and hastened to lead them up the stairs, where he gallantly bowed, as he opened a door for each lady.

After several valiant trips from the kitchen, he and Jacques had supplied them with hot water. And again he bowed, as he left and closed the door.

Louise quickly locked it, hoping that Thomas Jr. was alright with the men. She hastened to pull off her travel-stained garments and was soon immersed in the zinc tub. She revelled in the delightful scent of the soap furnished by Monsieur Courtelin and sank back in the sudsy water to survey her accommodations.

A trundle bed for Thomas Jr. was tucked under the big four-poster. Her bed, piled high with down comforters, tempted her nearly as much as the smell of the hot soup from below.

"Sister was right. The French have a way!" The events of the long arduous afternoon were already receding as she hurried to dress.

As she swept out into the hall to check on Thomas Jr. she encountered Miss Bayles, her cheeks rosy from the warmth of her bath, and the two ladies descended together.

"Although I have certainly given up all hopes of being her friend," thought Louise.

"Ah! Madame. Mademoiselle. How charming! So *chic!* Refreshed and aglow with good health, eh?"

Their host clasped his hands, and circled the two women, admiring their latest eastern fashions.

"Exquisite! Worth of the Royal Palace! Come! We have a light supper. I am so sorry it could not be more, but we had no idea you were coming through. Such a night! The driver has a lame horse, and must borrow my mule to return to Hornet's Crossing for a replacement. Poor man! I fed him as best I could. He has his slicker over his Mackinaw, but he faces a fearsome journey. Such heroes are our men of the West! They walk across mountains as unconcerned as I would walk the Champs Elysees. *Ma foi!* Such valor! Such bravery! . . . ."

"Such prattle, sir! I am faint with hunger," interrupted Miss Bayles. "Let us get on with our supper!"

"My sincerest apologies, Mademoiselle. But of course! Please, be seated. Make yourselves comfortable, and I will bring you the most delicious soup this side of San Francisco."

"Oh, my sister lives in San Francisco, Monsieur. She writes me that your dinners are exquisite—quite Continental. She raved about your succulent roast pig until I could nearly taste it. Are we not to partake of such a meal, after all my anticipation?"

"My regrets, Madame. But such short notice! A meal like that takes time! I have prepared soup *en cassorale,* Madame. A creation of my own devising, with tender bits of meat, fresh vegetables, and legumes. This is topped with bread crumbs and cheese and popped into the oven. *C'est tres bon!* Madame. *En cassorale!* Individual pots of nourishing perfection served with hot bread and wild quince preserves. And for the *piece de resistance*—an anisette, a French cordial, Madame."

"I am nearly ready to settle for a French boot," declared Miss Bayles. "Get on with it, man!"

The other passengers entered with Thomas Jr. and congregated before the fireplace, stomping their feet—blowing on

their hands—while loudly proclaiming the fate of the injured horse and the plight of the driver. The heat of the fire set the steam rising from their clothes as they turned and slapped their arms about their shoulders.

"Monsieurs, I took the liberty of laying out your clothes. I am sure you will be more comfortable after you have changed. See! The ladies are enjoying a supper." He urged them up the stairs. "Come! If you will give me your wet things, I will press them dry, and return them to you in the morning."

"Thomas," called Louise. He approached, and she whispered in his ear. "Be sure to change your drawers. Be a big boy, and dress yourself."

"So precocious," she exclaimed to Miss Bayles. "And yet, he has little regard for cleanliness, I fear. He has become very difficult since his dear father passed away six months ago. How is it you are making this trip, Miss Bayles? I've told you how my sister begged me come."

"I hope to find employment as a governess in San Francisco."

"Perhaps my sister could recommend you to friends. You must meet her as soon as we arrive. Oh! Isn't this soup delicious? I was famished. I couldn't eat that awful food this morning. My last meal was cooked by that Indian many miles back. She nearly frightened me out of my wits, but she could cook a meat pie. The driver teased me by saying it was horse meat, but of course I didn't believe him for a minute. I guess I'd know horse meat if I tasted it."

"Please, Mrs. Latimer. I have found myself eating many kinds of food in order to sustain myself on this terrible journey. I have managed to delude myself that each meal was nourishing despite its appearance. But I find the subject of eating horse meat abhorrent, even in jest. Forgive me, but could we change the subject."

"I am so sorry. I didn't realize . . . well, since we cannot continue until the driver returns, perhaps Monsieur Courtelin will have time tomorrow to fix his famous roast pork.

Wouldn't that be divine? I would hate to miss it, now that we are here. It's like going to Saratoga, and not partaking of the waters, you see. Thomas Jr. wanted to know if the pig is cooked with an apple in his mouth. Can you imagine? He saw a picture somewhere."

"Please, Mrs. Latimer," decried Miss Bayles. "I simply cannot keep my soup down, and listen to such talk."

"My dear . . . forgive me."

The men joined them, resplendent in dry attire, ruddy from the heat—and hungry for their supper. They were served by Monsieur Courtelin, and were soon replete, and lounging back in their chairs. Mr. Talbotson held up a cigar.

"May I smoke, ladies?"

"Please do, sir. I like the smell of a good cigar, but perhaps Miss Bayles . . . .?

"No! No! It's quite alright. If you will excuse me, I will retire to my room. Goodnight."

Thomas Jr. threw himself down before the fireplace and poked at the logs until he had them sputtering and shooting off sparks.

"Don't do that, Thomas. Come along with mother. We will be better for a good night's sleep, I'm sure. Goodnight, gentlemen."

Monsieur Courtelin pulled back her chair as she arose.

"Madame. My pleasure. Did you enjoy your meal? I regret very much that you will be leaving in the morning. I am always delighted to cook for my guests." He carried a lamp to guide them to their room and deftly turned back the covers. He plumped up the pillows and passed a warming pan back and forth, then stooped and pulled out the trundle bed.

"Did you not mention other guests, M'sieur?"

"*Oui,* Madame. A missionary—Brother Terrance Smythe. And a man from California—a farmer, I believe. They have already retired, Madame. *Bon soir.*"

The morning sun swept across the room and awakened Louise. For one luxurious moment she thought that she was

home in her own bed. Pushing aside all thoughts of the previous day, she stretched and curled her fingers about her head. A glance at the trundle, told her that Thomas Jr. was already up and about.

"In dirty underwear, no doubt. The rascal!" She looked at the commode with distaste, dressed hastily, and hurried down the stairs and out into the back yard. She pulled her shawl up over her head as protection against the dripping leaves.

"Miss Bayles will certainly like this path. There is all the privacy in the world."

She plunged ahead, then paused, as she viewed a fork in the trail. The voice of M'sieur Courtelin behind the bushes startled her.

"*Bonjour,* Madame Latimer. Take the turn to your left, Madame. This path goes to the ice house, where we keep our perishables."

"Thank you, Monsieur. Lovely morning!"

Louise entered the dining room an hour later, coiffed and collected, to find that Brother Smythe had joined their company. The drapes were pulled back to reveal a breathtaking view of the canyon. Washed clean by the storm, the red and gold leaves of the aspen and vine maple shone like polished apples against the dark green of the pines. Their host hustled between the kitchen and their table with platters of sausages, hot biscuits and tea, and a seemingly endless one-sided line of chatter.

"*Oui,* Monsieurs. We bought this place from M'sieur Colby, who built with much pride. We thought to make a modest living from serving travelers, but alas! The new route has changed all that. This was an old toll road, built in haste to be maintained at leisure. And now that the leisure time is here there no longer seems to be a need. Oh, we have a stage come through now and then. And such guests as Brother Smythe and Monsieur Joshua Myers—who, by the way, apparently left some time during the night. We were told this used to be a very busy place. Indeed! Mostly speculators and gamblers, on their way to

Sacramento. Women? Very few, and hardly ladies, I imagine. Now? Now it is very quiet here. The gold is gone! The miners are gone! The game is gone! And, they say that the railroad will be completed in a year or two. Can you imagine it? A railroad connecting East to West, where one may sit back and ride in comfort all the way across the country. When that happens, my friends, we will have to move on too. Until then? We survive! We get by! The wild pigs? Oh, yes! My son is very clever with his traps. Why, only this morning, he was able to capture a big fat sow. Since our mule is gone, he had much work to carry all the meat to the ice house. My regrets that you must continue on your journey, and miss the best of our hospitality. Every now and then, Jacques traps a wild pig. As I said, Monsieurs. We survive!"

While Mr. Kramer entertained Thomas Jr. with tales of buffalo hunts, Louise was enjoying a chat with Brother Smythe.

"Yes, Mrs. Latimer, I am on my way to Brother Young's winter home in Dixie. Yes, a strange name for a lonely spot in Utah, isn't it? Named by some homesick settler, no doubt."

"Did you say you came all the way from San Francisco, Brother Smythe? How is the trip between here, and there? I dread it. I wish I could just stay here, and let San Francisco come to me."

"The real hardships of your journey are nearly over, my dear Mrs. Latimer. I assure you. Why, when you reach Folsom, you will transfer to the railroad. Yes, Ma'am! The Sacramento Valley Railroad will carry you the last twenty-two miles to Sacramento. From the levee, you will change to the river-boat *New World,* one of our finest side-wheelers. She's a pretty sight! Painted white, with yellow stacks and gaily striped paddle-boxes. Thomas Jr. will enjoy it tremendously, I'm sure. Why, the nightly departure of the *New World* is the gala social event of the evening. And it will take you right to your destination."

"Well, I will most certainly look forward to that, Brother Smythe. It's nice to know that the end of our journey will be at least as comfortable as the start of our trip. I hope I will, in

due time, overcome the memory of all the miles in between."

Mr. Talbotson and young Ben Whitmore, in the meantime, were wondering how much longer it would take a driver to arrive with a fresh horse. Louise overheard Sam Talbotson say:

"He should be here by noon. No, it won't be Cyrus. Why, a ride like that would kill a man."

Breakfast was over before Louise began to wonder what was keeping Miss Bayles. "It's not like her to miss a meal," she thought.

"Excuse me, Monsieur Courtelin. I am concerned about Miss Bayles. Can she have taken the wrong path out back and wandered off?"

"Oh, *pardonez moi,* Madame Latimer. I should have told you. Mademoiselle Bayles sends her regrets. I took her up some hot chocolate this morning and found her indisposed. A slight *malaise.* She found herself unable to raise her head, and felt slightly feverish."

"Perhaps I should go up and see if I can help her."

"*Non, non,* Madame. She is resting comfortably. I myself served her an herb tea with a drop of laudanum which will settle her stomach and help her sleep."

"Will she be able to continue the trip with us?"

"Would you advise it, Madame? It will be very difficult even for you, and you are in good health. Surely it would be better for Mademoiselle Bayles to rest here for the time being. With the route over the summit closed by snow there will surely be another stage through here in a day or two. As I understand it, she is not expected at journey's end. She is alone, poor woman! She will be alright, I assure you. A slight touch of the flux. A mere inconvenience which will pass in twenty-four hours. I have seen it many times."

By eleven o'clock the brilliant autumn sun had warmed the verandah, and Louise was enjoying the carefree feeling of having nothing to do, in the perfect setting in which to do nothing. Thomas Jr. was off somewhere exploring the woods. She had just leaned back in her chair with a deep sigh of contentment,

when she was joined by Sam Talbotson and Buff Kramer.

"Young Ben has gone back down the road to intercept our driver and I let Thomas Jr. go with him. I hope you don't mind?"

"Not at all, Mr. Talbotson. I am relieved to have him occupied. He has been quite unruly this morning. Running up and down the stairs, and in and out of empty chambers. I was afraid he would disturb Miss Bayles."

"Have you seen our invalid this morning?"

"I knocked at her door, but there was no response. Apparently she is enjoying a good sleep. Monsieur Courtelin is treating her. I do hope she is alright."

"I've heard of a squaw tea that's used for such," interrupted Mr. Kramer. "I guess the Frenchie knows what he's about. Seems to have a hand in everything, our host. Why they have a garden out back. A smoke house *and* an ice house, though what they use for game, is beyond me. I ain't even seen a squirrel this morning. I'd get awful sick of wild pig if I had to stay here very long. But, you've got to be resourceful when you live out like this. I recollect a winter I spent alone in the Big Sandy. Trappin' pelts, I was. Miles from the nearest people. Even Indians was scarce. Well, sir, I broke my leg. Yessir! Broke the shinbone clean in two. Had to crawl back to my cabin. Used some kindling wood and boot lacings, and set it myself. Yep! Tied her up good and tight and then passed out. Lay there in my own stink for nearly a week."

"Perhaps Mrs. Latimer would rather not hear the details, Buff—"

"Oh, I don't mind, Mr. Talbotson, though I'm sure if Miss Bayles were here, the description of Mr. Kramer's tribulations would send her into a swoon. She seems to be quite sensitive. I recall at supper she was feeling a bit squeamish."

They were hailed from down the road by Ben and Thomas Jr.

"No rider in sight."

Ben joined them on the porch, his chest heaving for breath. "The road back there is a terrible mess. Why, if we'd been in that ol' top-heavy Concord, we'd have been over the side for sure. There's places where it drops right off a hundred feet, or more—barely wide enough for me and Thomas Jr., let alone a coach and six. And there's been mud slides, after us. We saw where boulders had crashed down from the mountain—cut a path clear across the road, and on down into the river. Big as a house they were."

He wiped his brow, and looked back down the road where Thomas Jr. was lashing at the bushes with a stick, bringing a shower of moisure from the rain-laden leaves down about his head.

"Like walking in the storm all over again out there. That boy seemed determined to club every bush we passed."

"Monsieurs! Madame! Am I to assume that your driver has not yet returned? *Ma foi!* Perhaps I should think about dinner. A late start would not be appropriate for the road ahead. I may have the honor of having you as my guest for another night. It would be my pleasure! No trouble at all! I will cook for you my roast pork *a la francaise,* prepared as your sister described it, Madame. Though I don't seem to recall if it was the piglet, or the sow that was served her."

"It was baby pig, with an apple in his mouth," interjected Thomas Jr. "I want an apple in his mouth."

"*Non, mon petit ami.* It is no longer done. We would not offend your *mamon* with such a display. Tonight we have the loin of pork. But now—let us go in to lunch. I have prepared a humble, but nourishing repast, garnered from the land." He hurried off to the kitchen, as Mr. Kramer stated: "I told you the fella was resourceful! That's how you survive in the wilderness. You gotta be resourceful."

The afternoon was splendid. Louise loosened her stays and lay on the big bed, drowsily listening to the sounds of the

house. Thomas Jr. had vehemently refused to take a nap, and was off somewhere with the men. There was an occasional clang of spoon against pan in the kitchen, and the far off whinnying of the horses in the barn. The steady droning of bees in the warmth of the late blooming woodbine outside the window lulled her to doze.

The loud cry of Thomas Jr. in distress, interspersed with an angry staccato of French, aroused her and sent her running to the window. A tall unkempt man had Thomas Jr. by the ear, and was pulling him forcefully toward the house.

She hastily arranged her clothes and ran downstairs, where she pushed her way past the other guests and confronted the stranger.

"Release him at once, sir! At once, I say!"

Monsieur Courtelin appeared at her shoulder and exchanged a flurry of rapid French with the man, who then released Thomas Jr. with one final jerk, which sent him sprawling to the ground.

"Now just a gol-darned minute there, mister! That ain't no way to treat a youngster, no matter what he's done," sputtered Buff. He made to roll up a sleeve and step toward the angry man.

"Wait, Monsieur," said their host, holding up his hand. "Our deepest apologies. This is my oldest son, Louis. He has just returned from hunting, and carried some small game to the ice house. While he was inside he heard a noise on the roof, and when he went out to investigate, he found our small *enfant gate* trying to poke a hole through the sod. *Ma foi,* such distruction would surely let in the rain. Or worse still, the sun. Our supply of ice is limited, *mon ami.* We can only replenish it when the lake above is again frozen solid this winter. The ice must be hauled down with great effort, M'sieur. It is very strenuous, difficult work. Let us relax and forget this unpleasantness. It would be my pleasure to serve you a glass of wine. This way my friends. A glass of claret. Some of the last to come all the way from France."

Louise had gathered up a sullen Thomas Jr. and was beating

the mud and leaves from his clothes.

"I would beat him elsewhere, had I the strength."

"Excuse me, Ma'am. Can I help?" asked Mr. Kramer. "I could take him over to the pump and wash his face and hands, if you like."

"Why, thank you, Mr. Kramer. You are most kind. This is so embarrassing. I don't know what gets into the boy." She shrugged her shoulders helplessly. They were disturbed by a commotion at the barn, and turned to see their driver draw rein and slump in the saddle. He clung to the mule's mane, and flipped the lead rope over the horse's neck. Buff Kramer was the first to reach him.

"Christamighty, Cyrus!" exploded Buff, lifting his arms to catch the exhausted man. "We never expected to see you back here! Why didn't they send up another driver?"

"Twarn't no one else! Flash floods at Hornet's Crossing. This old mule had to swim nigh most of the way! You still got somethin' in that flask of you'rn, Buff? I could sure use a snort." He dismounted with a tired groan, took the flask and gratefully tipped it up, swallowed and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and gave a great shudder.

"Gotta get some rest, Buff. Take care of the critters, will ya'?" He gave himself a shake, and stiff-legged it to the inn.

There was an air of festivity throughout the gaily lit hostel, as Louise dressed for dinner. A subdued clink of glasses and now and then a man's deep chuckle could be heard below. Thomas Jr. had been combed and made presentable, as well as an eight year old can be made presentable. He fidgeted and squirmed under scrutiny.

"Well, you'll do. Please try to behave this evening, Thomas. Monsieur Courtelin was very angry with you this afternoon. I really don't know what possessed you to climb up on top of the ice house."

"I wanted to see what was in there, Mother."

"What is in there, or any place else here, is really none of our business. Now stop wiggling, while I straighten your necktie."

"It wasn't rabbits he was carrying."

"Thomas, shame on you! Monsieur Courtelin distinctly said that his son had been hunting, and was taking small game to the ice house. You heard him yourself. It is not your place to question an adult's veracity. Now go downstairs. I'll join you in a minute."

Louise shrugged off her annoyance, and turned to her mirror. She was too old to be pinching her cheeks, and biting her lips, she knew. But the act came so naturally, and reminded her of her first ball.

"I don't know why I'm so excited," she thought. "It must be Monsieur Courtelin's dinner. I've been anticipating it all across the country. It will be such fun to compare notes with sister, and see which of us had the best meal." She gave her hair a final pat, with a jingle of bracelets, then whirled and left the room.

The gentlemen assembled at the fireplace greeted her gallantly as she entered and turned to admire the room. The table did indeed have a snowy linen cloth, and the cut crystal sparkled like diamonds under the dancing flicker of the candelabra. Her senses whirled from a ballet of tantalizing fragrances.

Mr. Talbotson held her chair and Louise sank upon it, overwhelmed by the opulence of her place setting. Beneath an array of crystal, silver extended from her plate down both sides, in an endless display of sizes and shapes.

"Why there is a utensil for every bite of food I shall eat all evening!"

She picked up a fork and pondered the heavily engraved ornate 'M' which was prominant on the handle.

"Surely not 'M' for Courtelin! Or even Colby House."

Perplexed, she replaced it beside her plate as the side dishes began to pass before her.

"Ah, here we are!" exclaimed Brother Smythe, rubbing his hands together, as their host appeared bearing a huge platter. M'sieur Courtelin advanced to Louise's left shoulder and held the platter so that she could serve herself. Bubbling hot slices of baked cinnamon apple had been tucked in between each slice of

taffy-colored meat, and around the edge of the dish were flowerettes made from the leaves of satiny watercress and velvety mint.

"A pretty display Monsieur! Attractively done!"

"Thank you, Madame. I have tried in every way to duplicate, or even surpass, the dinner served to your sister. The meat is cooked in our brick oven *en brochette,* that is to say, on a skewer, basted with my own wild mint sauce. The *bouquet garni* is the secret, Madame. A blend of parsley, marjoram, bay leaf, and thyme, to which I introduce a whiff of garlic. Superb! Madame."

As he passed on, Louise bent to her plate. A wild rice and mushroom dressing was delicious, fragrant and rich. The carrots were slightly sweetened and drenched with butter.

"Who would think to sweeten carrots?"

Each dish had its own distinctive flavor, enhanced by individual applications of a combination of seasonings. The parsnips were pureed, and topped with browned buttered crumbs, and Louise was piqued at a faint taste of dill. But the meat was the highlight of the meal. Succulent and savory, with a flavor she had never experienced before. The subtle blend of herbs delighted her and the scent of garlic, elusive as a puff of smoke, was indispensible. She passed a small crock of *marmelade* to Brother Smythe and reached for a fresh hot roll, yeasty and softly rounded.

"Truly worth all the hardships, don't you agree, Mr. Talbotson?"

"Fine meal! Don't know when I've had a better one."

As Monsieur Courtelin cleared the table, he announced, "And now, my friends, in your honor I have prepared *baba* with *barle-duc*—a rum cake topped with a sauce of currants and honey."

"To top a superlative meal, M'sieur! My compliments. I am sure my sister's could not have been better. It is too bad that Mr. Barter and Miss Bayles weren't able to join us."

"Oui, Madam. M'sieur Barter is still sleeping. As for Mademoiselle Bayles? She is here in spirit. I have served her to the

best of my ability, I assure you. She is comfortable, Madame, and bids me tell you not to be concerned."

By the time they had finished their dessert, Thomas Jr. was nodding in his chair. Louise shook him gently and guided him toward the stairs.

"Good night, gentlemen! We shall see you in the morning."

Brother Smythe covered a yawn, as he rose to join her.

"I'll light your way, Mrs. Latimer. I must rise early myself."

They parted at the landing, and Louise managed to get Thomas Jr. through the door and on to his trundle bed.

"I declare! I don't know when he's the most trouble. Asleep, or awake. I must remember to get him to change his drawers in the morning."

At dawn, M'sieur Courtelin knocked softly on her door.

"Madame Latimer? I have brought you hot chocolate. Madame Latimer?"

"Yes, yes, M'sieur. I'm coming. I'm coming." Louise sleepily drew her dressing gown about her, made her way to the door, and turned the key.

"I beg your pardon, Madam, but the driver is most anxious to resume the journey. Such impatience! Already he has hitched up the horses. I will stir up your fire, Madame. There! It will soon be warm in here. Our small adventurer still sleeps, I see. Was he talkative about yesterday's mishap? So unfortunate! My son, Louis, is very hot-tempered, Madame. He does not comprehend the curiosity of small boys. A regrettable incident."

"It's all forgotten, M'sieur. He didn't even mention it. We find very little to communicate. Such a secretive child, if you know what I mean."

"*Oui,* Madame. A child that age will have his little secrets. It is the nature of a boy. Well, I must not keep you. The driver bids me tell you to hasten, if you please. Breakfast will be served when you are ready."

Louise dressed and woke Thomas Jr. After she had made him wash and change from the skin out, she hastily wrote a brief note to Miss Bayles and slipped it under her door.

Breakfast was light, but sufficient, and after the passengers had settled their bill, M'sieur Courtelin herded them towards the coach.

"My friends, I took the liberty of preparing you a basket for your journey. You will have at least three more days on the road through this mountain. Accommodations are most primitive, I fear."

"Please tell Miss Bayles we will look forward to seeing her in San Francisco. I pushed a note under her door with my sister's name and address."

"Everybody up," cried the driver.

"Adieu, my friends," waved M'sieur Courtelin.

"Bon voyage!"

"Good-bye! Good-bye!"

The sky was just turning light as the sturdy little mud-wagon pulled out on the road heading west. For once, Thomas Jr. was subdued. Still drowsy, he slumped in a corner. Young Ben had chosen to join Cyrus Barter on the driver's seat, up front. And, since Miss Bayles had been left behind, the remaining passengers had plenty of room to be comfortable.

The discomfort began as they left the comparative level of the road which led past Colby Station and once again began to climb and twist along the canyon wall. Curving, as the river had curved; turning, as the river had turned; clinging to a road, midway between river and sky, on a cliff only meant for goats.

Louise felt a stomach-wrenching dizziness as she looked straight down into the awesome depths of the river bed, which fell away beneath her window. She shuddered, and vowed not to look again as she leaned over and pulled a lap robe up over Thomas Jr. and then settled back in her corner of the seat.

"Well, that was quite a nice interlude, wouldn't you agree?" asked Louise.

Mr. Talbotson turned and answered.

"Yes, I found it very pleasant, and yet, there is something about that man Courtelin that rubs me wrong."

"I'm sure Mr. Courtelin made every effort to make our stay

enjoyable."

"I'm sure he did! And I can't quite put my finger on what troubles me, but did either of you happen to notice the letter 'M' engraved on the silver? I am convinced he is in some way connected with that fellow Maximillian who was executed in Mexico last June. He probably stole the silver, and everything else he has there at Colby Station. And he continued to use the name Colby, because he didn't want to advertise his whereabouts. What do you think, Buff?"

"Begging your pardon, Ma'am. I know how you looked forward to staying there. But, that man, and that place is all wrong. I tell you, when you stand up wind from a skunk, the stink is bearable, but the stink is still there. It's like studyin' a buffalo wallow. The water gets so muddied up, you can't see the bottom of the pool. Now I took a shine to young Tom, over there, and I didn't like the way that Frenchie kid treated him. It made me wonder why he got so all-fired het up about a little boyish prank. So I followed him, and Tom was right! That wasn't game Louis carried into the ice house. It was gold!"

"Gold!" gasped Louise. "Are you sure of that?"

Buff Kramer reached into his vest pocket with two fingers, and fished out a nugget the size of his thumbnail.

"I picked this out of the wall of a tunnel he's workin' back up in that mountain. There's a well-worn trail goes from the house up to the mine. He's washin' that ore in a little stream up there, and haulin' it in by the bags full. The ice house is the logical place to store it. Built like a fort, with them heavy timbers and that wrought iron door. I went up there to look at it. Looks like Courtelin used a cave in the rock, and built that thick wall across the front and roofed the little bit that stuck out with sod. Got a big ol' padlock on the door. I hid and watched as that Frenchie went in. Why he even barred it from the inside, whil'st he was in there. I think there's more gold than ice in that ice house, and I figure they're just hangin' on there until the mine peters out. Then they'll move on."

"Then Thomas was right when he said Louis Courtelin

hadn't carried game to the ice house. It was sacks of gold, he was taking through the door."

"Yes, Ma'am. And that Louis fella was afraid young Tom had seen him and guessed what it was. That's why he got so upset."

Conversation became impossible as the mud-wagon wheels sank into potholes, and lurched over protruding rocks. It seemed to Louise that their driver was trying to make up for lost time by urging the horses on to top speed, on a road where no speed should have been possible. She clung to her window strap, and tried to brace herself with her other hand pressed against the seat beside her, longing for the journey to be over.

"I shall stay in California until they finish the railroad, if it takes two years or two hundred."

They had stopped periodically to breathe the horses, but at noon Cyrus pulled up beside a small waterfall and announced his intention of spending an hour before their last push over the top of the pass. His passengers welcomed the chance to get out and stretch their legs. While Cyrus watered the horses, Mr. Talbotson lifted out the basket of food that M'sieur Courtelin had prepared for them. Louise sank down on a mossy rock with a sigh. Despite the obvious dislike Mr. Talbotson and Buff Kramer had shown for the Frenchman, she had enjoyed her stay at Colby House, and was thankful for the good food he had provided.

Thomas Jr. had resumed his zest for adventure, and spent most of the hour climbing and exploring the steep bank above the waterfall. He returned muddy and dishevelled with a handful of wildflowers which he shyly held out to his mother. Louise smiled and hugged him to her, aware that she had misjudged him back at the hotel.

"They are lovely, Thomas. Thank you." She bit her lip and did not scold him for getting muddy. However, she did ask him, nicely, to pull up his stockings.

The rest of the day became a test of endurance. A muscle-straining contest, just to hold on to her seat, and not ricochet

from side to side. At times she envied the lone rider who had left Colby House twenty-four hours ahead of them.

"Surely riding in a saddle would be more comfortable, and even if it isn't the stranger is a day closer to his destination, while we still have two more days to go."

Bone weary, with muscles trembling, she alighted at dusk when they stopped for a light supper from their basket.

"We'll build a fire, and rest the horses until the moon comes up," stated Cyrus.

As they ate, huddled around the fire, Louise wondered aloud how Miss Bayles was faring.

"Funny thing about that," said their driver. "Had to leave a woman there about six weeks ago when the summit was closed by a slide. There's few women can make this trip, I reckon. Must be the change in the water, or maybe the altitude."

Mr. Talbotson stepped back from the brightly burning fire, and looked up at the stars. Louise wondered for a moment if he was praying, and felt a shiver go down her back as she thought of what he must be feeling. His eyes looked haunted by the memory of dead faces. Young boys, who seemed like brothers. She couldn't bear the sadness, and turned to the fire for comfort.

They watched the trees become black silhouettes as the white light of the rising moon began to appear at the top of the mountain and spread ghostly shadows along the ground. It topped the ridge, and appeared full and cold. Turning night into ghastly day.

"Well, that's light enough for me. Let's douse the fire and get everybody up."

Cyrus stood up and reached for the bucket, just as they heard thundering hooves resounding from wall to wall of the canyon. As the horses drew closer, they could hear the creaking of leather, the jingle of spurs, the hollow, jarring breath of horses at full gallop.

"Sounds like a lot of men—riding hard."

"Might be a hold-up." Cyrus got out his shot-gun and held it

at ready. Louise clutched Thomas Jr. as Mr. Kramer stepped before them, and Ben and Sam Talbotson crouched behind the wheel. The horsemen rounded the last bend at full gallop, then pulled rein as they sighted the fire.

"Hello—the camp! That you, Cyrus?"

Cyrus stepped forward, and shielded his eyes from the fire as he gazed out into the darkness. Then he caught the reflection of the flames dance off the leader's vest.

"Why, that's Sheriff Morgan! Come on in, sheriff. We won't do no more than pepper your hat-brims. What brings you out in the middle of the night?"

The men dismounted, and stood hat in hand as they saw Louise. Sheriff Morgan approached with a little man he introduced as Joshua Myers.

"You folks spend the night at Colby House?"

"Yes," answered Cyrus. "Left there at crack of dawn. That where you're headed?"

"Do you remember Mr. Myers, Cyrus? You told him you had to leave his wife behind at Colby House about six weeks back."

"Sure, I recollect that! The Frenchie said she took sick during the night, and would follow on the next stage."

"Well, she didn't come on the next stage, or the one after that. Josh here, met each one, and talked to the passengers. Nobody remembered even seeing her. Did anyone get sick this trip, Cyrus?"

"Yeah! A Miss Bayles."

"Oh, I'm sure she'll be alright," interrupted Louise. "Monsieur Courtelin was most concerned about her welfare. Why he was treating her with herb tea and hot soup when we left this morning. He's a marvelous cook, you know. We had a gourmet meal last night. Some of the best food I have ever tasted."

"Ma'am, there is just no easy way to tell you this. From what Josh here, saw and heard, when he went up there to look for his wife, we have reason to believe that what you ate up there, was your missing passenger, and what's left of her is hanging on a hook in the old man's ice house."

GOT'CHA COVERED

I was really knocked out by your first two covers—they rank with the best in western art. Were they done a long time ago by Remington or Russell, or more recently by a contemporary artist?

Garry Morgan
Portland, OR

Our first three covers are the work of California artist Jerry Wayne Downs. Jerry is extremely talented, but only recently has started to do westerns. His previous works included First World War aircraft, futuristic themes, and fine art in the style of the old masters. Jerry also does the interior illustrations for each issue of FAR WEST.

TOP 25

Okay—I know that the selections for the top twenty-five westerns (FAR WEST, April 1978) were done by the WWA, not you guys—but why were Frederick Manfred, Win Blevins and Tom Berger left off the list? Jumpin' Jehu man, these fellas have talent, write in other areas than the Old West, and are far more readable than many of the "Top 25" chosen by the WWA. What gives?

Alain Gage
East Orange, NJ

You will get no arguments about the talent of Manfred, Berger and Blevins, BUT the top twenty five westerns were based on a poll taken of WWA members—it reflects the personal reading tastes of several hundred professional writers. If there are any omissions, it is probably the result of those authors receiving fewer votes than say, Ernest Haycox.

TWO-HANDED SHOOTIST

Your April Cover was really exciting, but I think a bit inaccurate in the historical sense. The "shootist" is decked out in authentic period clothing, but using a very modern two-handed combat stance as he fires his pistol. My best friend (well, almost) says that a two-handed hold would have been used even back in the last century. Who is right?

Richard Tyler
Richmond, VA

If there is any money riding on the outcome of this letter, you are going to have to pay your (almost) best friend. The two-handed hold has been used by professional gun handlers for at least a century. In the late percussion era it was used by a young Bill Hickok, and later by Wyatt Earp. In Stuart Lake's biography of Earp, he quoted the former lawman as saying the most important thing to remember in a gunfight was to take your time . . . in a hurry! The two handed hold gave its user better accuracy, and better control for a fast second shot without any effect on speed from the holster. The old gunmen were professional shootists who depended on accuracy more than speed.

INDIAN SIGN LANGUAGE

This really doesn't have anything to do with FAR WEST (which I think is great) but I don't know who else to ask. Where can I learn Indian sign language?

Randy Evans
Issaquah, WN

Try contacting the Department of Ethnology at your state historical society. They can probably give you the name of a local resident who can teach you Indian sign. If they are unable to help, then get in touch with the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, DC.

WESTERN HISTORY BUFF

Reading FAR WEST has awakened in me a desire to know more about the history of the old west. Where should I start?

Pamela Halliday
Omaha, NE

We'd suggest you join the Western History Association for starters. Their secretary is Dr. Wm. Rowley, Department of History, University of Nevada, Reno, Nevada 89507. He will give you all the details needed for membership.

WESTERN MOVIES

Enclosed is my single vote for the best western movie (a secret ballot—ed.) ever made. When will FAR WEST publish the results?

Dana Loughead
San Francisco, CA

The August issue of FAR WEST will contain the readers choices for the Top Twenty Five western films.

gether packed quite a wallop. On COLT .45 the hero made a tortured draw with a brace of long barrelled Peacemakers. His draw might have been slow (Hell, he had twice as much barrel to pull out of the holster) but his accuracy was excellent, and he was able to drop 'em in their tracks every time.

Hugh O'Brien, star of WYATT EARP, portrayed the famous Western lawman in a brocaded vest, flat brimmed hat and totin' a shootin' iron with 12 inches of barrel. Earp's good buddy BAT MASTERSON was portrayed strolling through the West in a dark suit, derby hat and carrying a gold headed cane. The cane had a secret compartment in its doorknob sized handle. Other gimmicks were as varied as the story line was staid; some were frontier doctors, others sold life insurance. Will Hutchins was a lawyer in SUGAR FOOT, and Darin McGavin piloted a RIVERBOAT.

The gimmick in GUNSMOKE was that the show used no gimmicks. The stories and the characters were as real as the West they represented. While a lot of the TV Westerns lasted only a few weeks, GUNSMOKE went on for more than a quarter century, its strength being a dramatically accurate portrayal of the old West. Matt, Miss Kitty, Doc, Chester and Festus all captured the trueness of Western spirit. They faced real situations and reacted to them as real people. The result was that as others fell by the wayside, GUNSMOKE went on and on and on.

It's been a long time since there has been much of a choice in Western fiction magazines. In fact, FAR WEST now stands alone as the only Western fiction magazine that makes a monthly appearance on your local newsstand. The reason FAR WEST has survived while the others have ridden off into the sunset is that FAR WEST does its best to keep its stories historically accurate, and free of the gimmicks that shot down all of the rest. You can be sure if you read something in FAR WEST that it'll be pretty close to the way things were on the frontier.

Keep an eye peeled for our 25th Anniversary issue!

Don't Miss The Next Action Packed Issue

FAR WEST On Sale May 9